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The Irreducibility of Prayer

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Chapter 3

The Theological and Phenomenological Critique of Metaphysics

In the past decades, Jean-Luc Marion has established himself as one of the most important figures of the contemporary philosophical debate. Deeply influenced by Husserl, Heidegger and Levinas, as well as by Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, starting from the late 70s, he has dedicated important studies on the philosophy of Descartes, published seminal theological works, and formulated a radical phenomenology which extends beyond both Husserlian and Heideggerian insights.¹³⁶

A categorization of this impressive body of work could certainly be conceived. Marion himself would generally draw a line between his theological and phenomenological projects. At a closer look, however, the different orientations of his works deeply inform and influence each other. The possibility of this interconnection is essentially given by the common ground of a reflection on the limits of the metaphysical system of thought and the prospect of its overcoming. From the first studies on Cartesian metaphysics as onto-theology and on the forms of idolatrous and iconic language in reference to the divine, up to the more recent concerns of pushing the boundaries of “traditional” phenomenology, Marion has always been persuaded by the possibility of moving beyond the frequently announced “end of metaphysics”.

In Marion’s writings, the topic of prayer situates itself right at the convergence of all these problems. Just like Derrida, albeit with quite some notable differences, Marion’s

¹³⁶ Marion’s works on Descartes include *On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism: The Constitution and the Limits of Onto-theology in Cartesian Thought*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, John Cottingham and Stephen Voss (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999); *On the Ego and on God: Further Cartesian Questions*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007); and *Descartes’s Grey Ontology*, trans. Sarah E. Donahue (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2017). His most important theological works include *God Without Being (GWB)*; *The Idol and Distance (ID)*; and *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). His main phenomenological works include *Reduction and Givenness*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998); *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness (BG)*; *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine (ISP)*; and *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

attention to this theme is first to be linked to discussions surrounding what is generally called “negative theology”. In one of his early works, entitled *The Idol and Distance* [*L’idole et la distance*, 1977], Marion dedicates a crucial part of the analysis to the role of prayer and praise in Dionysius the Areopagite. Some of these discussions return in *God Without Being* [*Dieu sans l’être: Hors-texte*, 1982] and are then well-articulated in Marion’s 1997 lecture “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’”, which represents a direct response to Derrida’s “How to Avoid Speaking”. In *Chapter 3*, we will start off from this specific discussion, understanding the particular value given by Marion, in contrast to Derrida, to a “third way” beyond affirmation and negation. To reach a conclusion of this discussion without, nonetheless, giving in to easy oppositions, we will argue that the most crucial divergence between the philosophers’ views on “negative theology” does not reside on the consideration of a third way beyond *cataphasis* and *apophasis*, but rather concerns the experience of language that could effectively access this third path. It is in this fundamental passage that the topic of prayer reveals all its importance.

We will approach Marion’s conception of prayer by first situating it against the background of his general critique of metaphysics, and then by exploring three fundamental terms of his thought: the idol, icon and distance. Then, in *Chapter 4*, we will delve into Marion’s interpretation of prayer as a form of iconic language and explore the crucial term of “denomination”, which will represent the figure of a reduction of prayer to a non-metaphysical essence. This figure will allow us to better comprehend the proximity and distance between Marion’s and Derrida’s conception of prayer. We will argue that Marion’s denomination retrieves, at a different level, the same issues as Derrida’s figure of the apostrophe. If, in fact, the indeterminacy of Derrida’s prayer resides in a pure movement of addressing the other as other, Marion shifts the indeterminacy to the moment right after this: the nomination of the addressee.

The issue remains the reduction and rarefaction of prayer. Marion, just like Derrida, is too indeterminate and radical in his talk about prayer and God, address and addressee. His language is negative and empty to the point that almost anything can stand in for a legitimate addressee of the act of prayer. At the same time, however, in Marion’s analysis a certain determination remains. In the attempt to avoid an overly radical reduction which would turn the act into pure silence, Marion argues that prayer has to maintain a logical rigour.

The third way

In Derrida's philosophical itinerary, the problematic of the language of prayer originated from the rather specific debate on the affinity between negative theology and *différance*. Its importance, however, extends far beyond the borders of these two domains. Especially at an early stage of his reflection, at stake is, for Derrida, almost exclusively the authenticity and primacy of the thinking of *différance* over negative theology: the latter representing a fearsome opponent – perhaps the only one possible, as Marion suggests¹³⁷ – and prayer the most unequivocal formal and theoretical heterogeneity between the two. Nonetheless, later on the topic of prayer takes for Derrida a different direction, gaining a certain autonomy with respect to its point of emergence. It essentially becomes the object of a desire, that of the possibility of a purely pre-predicative mode of language able to overcome the boundary imposed by the metaphysical logic. This desire, however, is quickly tempered by the realization, in a classic deconstructionist fashion, of an essential interdependence between the pure prayer and the determined prayer.

To sum up, three stages of a life-long reflection: first, the divergence between negative theology and *différance*; then, the possibility of another form of utterance, not marked by onto-theology; and finally, the inevitable slippage into determination of this model of speech. These stages are conveniently encapsulated in the seminal text “How to Avoid Speaking: Denegations”, which dates to 1986. Ten years later, at a conference at Villanova University, Derrida's reflections are the object of a detailed and critical response by Marion, in a lecture quite aptly entitled “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology’”.¹³⁸

In the intentions of the organizers of this conference, the event did not solely constitute the occasion to gather together a large body of international scholars in dialogue with Derrida. It represented, above all, the attempt to seize a particular moment in recent work in philosophy and theology. In their words, “a moment in which the ‘overcoming

¹³⁷ “Negative theology does not furnish deconstruction with new material or an unconscious forerunner, but with its first serious rival, perhaps the only one possible. In short, for deconstruction what is at issue in ‘negative theology’ is not first of all ‘negative theology’, but deconstruction itself, its originality and its final pre-eminence [...]. When deconstruction sets out to attack what it, along with the entire tradition, still designates with the imprecise title ‘negative theology’, it is not making an attack so much as it is defending itself” (IN 22).

¹³⁸ This title plays on both of Derrida's discussions on negative theology: “How to Avoid Speaking” and “Save the Name (Post-Scriptum)” [*Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)*, 1993], first published in English with the title “Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices”.

of metaphysics' characteristic of continental philosophy since Heidegger and questions of a profoundly religious character have become increasingly and surprisingly convergent".¹³⁹ The title and content of Marion's lecture suggest no less than this. First, a critical response to Derrida's fundamental aversion to negative theology's onto-theological hyperbolism. Secondly, a reflection on the possibility for theology as a whole to exempt itself from the metaphysical conditions of discourse: that is to say, the possibility to shift from a purely predicative form of speech (affirmative and/or negative) with regard to the divine, to a resolutely non-predicative one. The latter is, for Marion, *the praising prayer*.

As we have seen, Derrida's different reservations concerning "negative theology" do not entirely prevent him from suspecting it of *de-negating*, that is to say, of doing exactly what it claims not to: affirm, predicate, say something *of* God. From the early remarks in "Différance" up to "How to Avoid Speaking", Derrida repeatedly stresses how negative theology fails to think God outside of the metaphysical concepts of being and essence, thus remaining subjected to deconstruction. Instead of disqualifying these categories, this particular form of theology denies them in order to re-establish them by means of a hyperbolism. By doing this, it would inscribe God back into the onto-theological structure of metaphysics. In brief, according to Derrida negative theology remains a mode of (hyper)positive theology, persistently and surreptitiously re-affirming what the apophatic movement is supposed to exclude.

This paradigmatic objection culminates in the criticism of Dionysius' praise to the Trinity as a linguistic form that remains emblematically predicative. This prompts an important distinction between prayer (*euchê*) and praise (*hymnein*). According to Derrida, the former – as Aristotle points out in a passage of *De Interpretatione*¹⁴⁰ – is "neither true nor false" and thus exempted from the theoretical conditions of discourse. The latter, on the contrary, cannot avoid qualifying and determining the addressee to whom it turns (in the case of Dionysius, as "Trinity", "hyperessential God", "guide of Christians"), and can then be submitted to a verification based on the truth value of assertions. In Aristotelian terms, praise would remain a form of apophantic discourse (*apophantikos logos*). While prayer pure and simple would switch to an essentially pragmatic mode of speech, the prayer which praises would still represent a clear form of predication.

¹³⁹ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1.

¹⁴⁰ Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 17a, 1–6.

Marion's contestation of these aversions focuses directly on the corpus traditionally attributed to the Pseudo-Dionysius, with particular attention to *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology*. Within these works, Marion first argues, a straightforward opposition between affirmations and negations, as the one that Derrida seems to take for granted, is actually untenable. A crucial passage of *The Mystical Theology* in particular sums up Marion's overall argument:

Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.¹⁴¹

Dionysius' direct attack to some grounding statements of Aristotelian logic is here evident. While Aristotle maintained in *De Interpretatione* that every affirmation has an opposite negation and, vice versa, every negation has an opposite affirmation, Dionysius refutes this rigid opposition.¹⁴² According to a clear hierarchy, Dionysius first maintains that, in speaking of the Cause of all, one should affirm all theses of beings; then, given that the Cause of all is above all beings, he claims that one should more appropriately deny all these affirmations;¹⁴³ finally, he rejects the idea that negations can actually grasp the transcendent Cause, as it stands beyond both every assertion and every denial.¹⁴⁴ Marion then argues that Dionysius never isolates the apophatic moment as such, but rather includes it, together with the cataphatic, in a threefold process which is supposed to annul both of them in a *third way*. Quite emblematically, then, the game of negative theology is played neither by the sole term of *apophasis*, nor between the two opposite terms of *cataphasis* and *apophasis*, but rather between three terms, the last of which is radically irreducible to the previous two.

Far from presenting the threefold structure as an exclusive prerogative of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, Marion maintains that this articulation is at work in the thought of authors

¹⁴¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, I, 2, 1000B.

¹⁴² Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 17a, 31–33.

¹⁴³ See also the following passage in *The Celestial Hierarchy*: “Since the way of negation appears to be more suitable to the realm of the divine and since positive affirmations are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible, a manifestation through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible” (Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, II, 3, 141a).

¹⁴⁴ See also *The Mystical Theology*, V, 1048b.

quite distant from Dionysius, such as Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa, even if with some notable differences regarding the hierarchy between affirmations and negations, and the form of final achievement (IN 24–25).¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, this “third way” radically changes the scope of what one conventionally calls “negative theology”, and in particular of the negative moment that constitutes it. The third position overcomes the opposition between affirmation and negation, synthesis and separation, true and false. Simply put, in Marion’s words, “the third way would transgress nothing less than the two truth values, between which the entire logic of metaphysics is carried out” (IN 26). Dionysius would then have no need of transmuting negation into affirmation, as Derrida maintained, for the simple reason that both ways are inappropriate for what concerns the Cause of all. Both *cataphasis* and *apophasis*, in fact, need to be surpassed by a third and final, neither-affirmative-nor-negative way. According to Marion, the lexicon of the mountain climber employed by Dionysius throughout *The Mystical Theology* testifies exactly to this: in this third and final way one is attempting to free oneself from the binary terms of metaphysical discourse (IN 26).

“Hyper”, “without”, “über”

According to this reasoning, it is then no longer a question of saying or unsaying, of affirming or denying, as both these ways are inadequate and ancillary to a third which transgresses them. *A fortiori*, it is not even a matter of *overdetermining* the apophatic moment, that is to say, of subtly disguising an affirmation under the prefix “hyper”. Dionysius would have no interest in doing this, as he resolutely claims one needs to aim at what remains irreducible to both affirmations and negations.

In the attempt to further corroborate his argument, Marion contests that the use of the prefix “hyper” can hide an affirmation, thereby reinstating the ontological instance. This – let us recall it – is one of Derrida’s main objections: the “hyper” – he writes in reference to Dionysius’ postulation of God as *hyperousious* – “has the double and

¹⁴⁵ As Marion duly notes, contrary to Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas states the pre-eminence of affirmations on negations and then acknowledges their submission to a more eminent way; and Nicholas of Cusa’s negative theology culminates with the discovery of infinity as the experience of incomprehension (IN 24–25). See *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 13, a. 2c and 3c, 81–83; and *De docta ignorantia*, I, c. XXVI, in 292–97 (*On Learned Ignorance*, trans. Fr. Germain Heron [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954], 61).

ambiguous meaning of what is above in a hierarchy, thus both beyond and more. God (is) beyond Being but as such is more (being) than Being: *no more being* and *being more than Being*: being more” (HAS 90). This hyperbolism, far from depriving God of the category of “being”, would on the contrary reaffirm it more firmly. This means that negative theology, in the attempt to escape metaphysical logic, would actually fall back into it.

To this critique, Marion responds by quoting Kevin Hart who, among other scholars, argues that “the prefix ‘*hyper*’ has a negative rather than a positive form”, and therefore that “to say that God is *hyperousios* is to deny that God is a being of any kind, even the highest or original being”.¹⁴⁶ According to this, the Greek word *hyperousios*, usually translated in English as “superessential”, does not posit a supreme being beyond the finite categories of being. Rather, it refers to a pure transcendence with respect to all conceptions of being and being-present; to a divinity that is *otherwise than being*, as Kevin Hart suggests in the same passage with an explicit reference to Levinas’ formulation.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, Marion insists that the predication of a superessentiality is not the *purpose* of Dionysian discourse (IN 27). As the Areopagite himself writes in the fifth chapter of *The Divine Names* concerning the name of “being”, “the proposed goal of discourse is not to expose the superessential essence as superessential [...]; rather it is to *praise* the essentializing procession of the thearchy into the principle of all essence and thence to all beings”.¹⁴⁸ What is indicated in this passage clearly holds a fundamental importance for Marion’s argument. It suggests not just the disqualification of predication, but above all the abandonment of the metaphysical logic in view of a transgression through the *praising* of what represents the founding condition of this very logic.

According to Marion, then, the prefix “hyper” does not furtively reintroduce an ontological predication. In this sense, it radically differs from the preposition “without”, whose ambiguous meaning, at once negative and hyperaffirmative, is rightly suspected by

¹⁴⁶ Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 202. See also John D. Jones’s introduction to Dionysius’ *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, ed. John D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 32n64. Marion also quotes Francis Bertin, translator of the French edition of Eriugena’s work, who writes that “the prefixes *super* or *more than* in no way imply a way of eminence which surreptitiously re-introduces affirmations at the heart of the negations. When one says that God is Superessence, one does not at all suggest that God is an Essence situated at the apex of the hierarchy of essences, but rather that God is essentially void” (*De Divisionae Naturae*, vol. 1 [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995], 97).

¹⁴⁷ Marion too refers to Levinas’ notorious formulation in a paragraph of his lecture, entitled “Without Being – Otherwise Than Being” (IN 30–33).

¹⁴⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, V, 1, 816b [JLM] (emphasis added).

Derrida in reference to Meister Eckhart's quoting of Saint Augustine: "St. Augustine says: God is wise without wisdom, good without goodness, powerful without power".¹⁴⁹

Without does not merely dissociate the singular attribution from the essential generality: wisdom as *being-wise* in general, goodness as *being-good* in general, power as *being-powerful* in general. It does not only avoid the abstraction tied to every common noun and to the being implied in every essential generality. In the same word and in the same syntax it transmutes into affirmation its purely phenomenal negativity, which ordinary language, riveted to finitude, gives us to understand in a word such as *without*, or in other analogous words. It deconstructs grammatical anthropomorphism. (HAS 78–79).¹⁵⁰

For Derrida, the "without", as much as the "hyper", represents a clear sign of the ontological wager of hyperessentiality at play in negative theology. The strategy of denegation is for him manifest in both words. Insofar as they both entail a disguised affirmation rather than an actual negation, they would indeed be "analogous words". For Marion, instead, the equivocal character of the two terms must be doubted. Only the "without" maintains an ambiguous status and can be suspected of re-establishing the ontological instance. The "hyper", on the contrary, constitutes for him a radical negation of the categories of being applied to the divine (IN 27).

This cursory reference to Eckhart's passage allows us to highlight an important detail. Throughout "In the Name" Marion takes into considerations a wide array of (mostly Christian) authors in support of his argument: Dionysius *in primis*, but also Saint Paul, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Philo of Alexandria, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, Augustine of Hippo, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusa. No allusion, however, is made to Eckhart von Hochheim. One would easily condone this absence, were it not for the fact that the Rhineland mystic is a crucial and constant reference of Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking", the text Marion is directly arguing against.

¹⁴⁹ Meister Eckhart, *Deutschen Werke Band I*, Predigt 9, 146.

¹⁵⁰ And further on: "The *without* [...] marks neither a privation, a lack, nor an absence" (HAS 90). For a general overview of Derrida's usage of the word "without", see Kevin Hart, "Without Derrida", *The European Legacy*, 12, 4 (2007), 419–429.

This avoidance may have to do with Eckhart's rather singular form of apophaticism which significantly differs from the one employed by Dionysius or later medieval thinkers. This first entails a clear distinction between God's absolute "being" (*esse absolute; esse simpliciter; esse totum et plenum*) and creatures' formal "being" (*esse determinatum; esse hoc et hoc*); and then, a dialectic that theologian Vladimir Lossky has aptly called "*apophasis of opposition*", consisting in detaching God from any creatural attribution by either denying of God what is affirmed of creatures, or denying of creatures what is affirmed of God.¹⁵¹ This justifies the presence, within Eckhart's speculative theology, as much of a strong critique of "being" as a strong affirmation of "being".

Strictly speaking, then, the divine category of "being" is not denied by Eckhart, but rather elevated through the supposition of an index of inadequacy between the indistinct *Esse* of the divine Cause and the exteriorized *esse* of the creatures. This is evident in different passages from the German Sermons, such as the following one: "If I say: God is a being – that is not true; he is a being beyond being [*überschwesendes Wesen*] and a nothingness beyond being [*überwesende Nichtheit*]"¹⁵² Here the dissociation between "God" and "being" clearly follows the association of "being" with a creatural determination. Or even more emblematically in the following excerpt from the well-known sermon *Quasi stella matutina*, quoted by Derrida as an exemplary instance of that ontological wager of hyperessentiality which, in his view, is at work in negative theology:

Unrefined masters say that God is a pure being [*ein lüter wesen*]; He is as high above being as the highest angel is above a fly. I would be speaking as wrongly in calling God a being as I would in calling the sun pale or black. God is neither this nor that. A master says: if anyone things that he has known God, even if he did know something, he did not know God. But when I said that God is not being and that He is above being [*über wesen*], I have not denied Him being [*ich im nicht wesen abegesprochen*] but, rather, I have exalted being in him [*ich hän ez in im gebæhet*].¹⁵³

This passage directly contradicts Marion previous considerations regarding the third, neither-affirmative-nor-negative way, and the pure negativity employed by

¹⁵¹ Lossky, *Théologie négative et connaissance de Dieu*, 197–207.

¹⁵² Meister Eckhart, *Deutschen Werke Band III*, Predigt 83, 442 (*The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 463).

¹⁵³ Meister Eckhart, *Deutschen Werke Band I*, Predigt 9, 146. For this passage I follow the translation in Derrida's text (HAS 78).

Dionysius through the suffix “hyper”. Eckhart’s “über”, contrary to Dionysius’ “hyper”, does not disqualify the category of “being”, but is rather employed as a means to *exalt* the ontological instance in God. One can then simply affirm that if the *Corpus Areopagiticum* is indeed exempted from a critique of hyperessentiality, the same cannot be said of Eckhart’s work. This means, more generally, that what Marion asserts regarding the third way beyond affirmations and negations can perhaps be applied to Dionysius’s negative theology and to a handful of other selected thinkers, but not necessarily to a tradition of negative theology more broadly intended.

Divergence and convergence

The difference between Dionysius’ and Eckhart’s speculative procedures condenses the divergence of opinions between Marion and Derrida. This divergence, however, inadvertently brings to light a convergence which allows us to approach a conclusion to the debate concerning negative theology and to move forward to the topic of prayer. The essential issue is the one of the impossibility of a clear-cut *definition* of negative theology’s nature and identity.

As we have previously pointed out, “negative theology” is a loose heading describing a textual practice whose unity is hard to delimit; it is a pluralized and heterogeneous project which cannot be restricted to any historical figure, as exemplary as this might be. Quite emblematically, the formula itself suffers from a general indeterminacy, being rarely employed by the authors to whom it is attached. Reason why Marion first suspects it might simply be a modern invention (IN 21), and then he decides to change the terms of the discourse by speaking, in accordance with Dionysius, of “mystical theology” rather than “negative theology”. Derrida, for his part, in his direct response to Marion’s lecture manifests a general agreement on the third path beyond affirmations and negations. This should not come as a surprise. After all, both in “How to Avoid Speaking” and “Post-Scriptum”, Derrida is very cautious in treating the so-called “negative theology” or “negative theologies” as a problematic entity rather than a secure reference. Far from having a systematic thesis on it, he takes great pain to highlight the multiplicity of voices it hides. A multiplicity which, he maintains with some irony in his response, is at work even within his “little corpus” (IN 42–45). Accordingly, Derrida does

not question the positing of a third way beyond predication which, he argues, actually plays a decisive role in his texts. He admits that it might certainly be true that the whole purpose of mystical theology is to ascend towards the Cause “beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion”.¹⁵⁴

The problem, then, is not whether there is a third way of speaking about God, but whether there exists a form of utterance, a different experience of language, that could effectively access this path. The difficulty lies in this translation, this passage from predication to non-predication, in the fundamental experience that should carry us toward the intuition of the ineffable. Both Marion and Derrida agree that it is here a matter of taking seriously the pragmatic aspect of discourse (IN 46). That is to say, it is matter of not forgetting that language is not solely a signifying structure, but that it also includes within itself, in a rather problematic way, the act and the effects of its enunciation.

It is exactly on this point that the researches of Marion and Derrida converge, approach each other tangentially, without nonetheless ever overlapping. Both identify in the language of prayer the possible structure of a discourse exempted from onto-theology. Derrida refers to a prayer without content and addressee, suspended on the open space traced by a simple apostrophe. He calls this “prayer in itself”, “prayer in its essence” (*euché*). Marion, instead, speaks of a prayer that does not shy away from naming its addressee. The shift from predication (affirmative and/or negative) to a resolutely non-predicative, purely pragmatic, form of speech, is described by him as the passage *from discourse to the prayer which praises (hymnein)*.

It is this convergence that we will attempt to comprehend in the following pages, persuaded by the desire – expressed by Derrida himself, but never actually satisfied – of a future, more exhaustive discussion on prayer: “We should have a discussion about praise and prayer; it would be a difficult discussion” (IN 45). We will articulate our analysis in the following steps. First, we will examine the problematic relation between the theological and phenomenological reflection in Marion. This will allow us to better situate Marion’s account of prayer on the background of his systematic critique of modern metaphysics. Secondly, we will examine the important concepts of idol, icon and distance at the base of Marion theological and phenomenological thought. Then we will delve into Marion’s conception of prayer as a form of iconic language and explore the term of

¹⁵⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, I, 2, 1000b.

“denomination”, which will represent the particular figure of a reduction of prayer to a non-metaphysical essence. This will allow us to better comprehend the proximity of Marion’s conception of prayer to Derrida’s.

Theology and phenomenology

The fundamental passage from discourse to prayer in Dionysian theology is first emphasized by Marion in an important text, entitled *The Idol and Distance*. This early text, despite being theological in essence, constitutes the point of emergence of different concerns which will characterize Marion’s most recent, and better-known, phenomenological works. Of the three terms of idol, icon and distance which constitute the cornerstones of the whole book, the first two recur not only in Marion’s most notorious theological work, *God Without Being*, but they are also the object of a phenomenological analysis in a text of the late 90s, entitled *The Crossing of the Visible* [*La Croisée du visible*, 1996]. The third, instead, deeply resonates with Marion’s more mature phenomenology of donation or givenness, as it is exposed in *Reduction and Givenness* [*Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie*, 2010] and *Being Given* [*Étant donné*, 2013]. Furthermore, the topic of prayer itself, on which Marion extensively meditates in this first text in relation to Dionysian theology, is also the subject of a phenomenological reflection in later studies, such as *The Crossing of the Visible* and *In the Self’s Place* [*Au lieu de soi. L’approche de Saint Augustin*, 2008].

This raises the question of the relationship between theology and phenomenology, a question whose complexity and wealth of implications is particularly evident in Marion’s reflection. The analysis of this relationship is then fundamental in order to situate Marion’s thought in the contemporary philosophical landscape and, more specifically, in the French one. Furthermore, it is also essential in order to comprehend the theoretical background on which Marion’s account of prayer is based.

Thomas A. Carlson’s introductory remarks to *The Idol and Distance* constitute a good point of access to this problematic. Right on the opening page, he calls, despite Marion’s reservations, for a conjoint analysis of the theological and phenomenological projects, encouraged by the positive challenges that this reading would offer in particular to scholars who like to dwell right on the border of these two domains. These scholars are

the ones, in Carlson's words, "concerned with those points of interplay and undecidability where theology and philosophy inform, provoke, and challenge one another in endlessly complex ways" (*ID* xi). For reasons that we will soon investigate, Marion indeed holds the theological and phenomenological projects to be distinct. Nonetheless, Carlson thinks that the possibility of this conjoint reading is offered by Marion's systematic critique of metaphysics, on which both projects are founded. Reading Marion's theological and phenomenological reflections "each in light of the other" then essentially means probing the unstable borders between the two domains that an analysis on the limits of the metaphysical system and the possibility of its overcoming brings to the surface.

The critique of metaphysics has been Marion's central concern since his early studies on Descartes: *Descartes's Grey Ontology* [*Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes*, 1975], *On Descartes' White Theology* [*Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*, 1981], *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism* [*Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes*, 1986] and *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics* [*Questions cartésiennes I. Méthode et métaphysique*, 1991]. In these texts, Marion identifies in Descartes the first thinker to actually articulate a Heideggerian conception of metaphysics as onto-theology.

According to a historically verifiable sense, metaphysics traditionally is the single science that treats of being in general and beings par excellence.¹⁵⁵ From this follow the late schematic division between *metaphysica generalis* (*ontologia*), and *metaphysica specialis* (*theologia rationalis, psychologia rationalis, cosmologia rationalis*). With Descartes, this common notion assumes the positive shape and scope of a system operating a grounding of beings on a first being, according to the conceptual elaboration which will be later provided by Heidegger in the section of *Identity and Difference* entitled "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics". This first being is, in a first moment, the *ego cogito* as the

¹⁵⁵ Marion often recalls the definition given by Thomas Aquinas – "*Metaphysica* simul determinat de ente in communi et de ente primo, quod est a materia separatum [*metaphysics* simultaneously determines (how things stand) concerning being in general and concerning the first being which is separated from matter]" (Thomas Aquinas, "Proemium Sancti Thomas", in *Librum Primum Aristotelis de Generatione et Corruptione, Exposition*, in *Aristotelis Libros – De Caelo et Mundo, De generatione et Corruptione, Meteorologicorum – Expositio*, ed. Raymondo M. Spiazzi [Rome: 1952], 315) – and Francisco Suarez – "Abstrahit enim haec scientia a sensibilibus, seu materialibus rebus ..., et res divinas et materia separatas, et communes rationes entis, quae absque materia existere possunt, contemplatur: at ideo metaphysica dicta est, quasi post physicam seu ultra physicam constituta [This science abstracts from sensible and material things ..., and it contemplates the things that are divine and separated from matter and the common reasons of being, which can exist without matter. It was therefore named metaphysics, as it was instituted after physics or beyond physics]" (Francisco Suarez, "Proemium", *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, 2 vols., vol. 25 of *Opera Omnia*, ed. C. Berton [Hildesheim, 1965], 1:2). On the passage from the common notion of "metaphysics" to its conceptual elaboration in Heidegger's "The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics", see Marion's remarks in the article "Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology" (MP 574–76).

foundation of the *cogitata*; then, in the later Descartes of the *Meditations*, it is God as foundation of the ego and *causa sui* – a syntagma whose invention and positive employment Marion attributes to Descartes himself.¹⁵⁶

A *double onto-theology* then unfolds in the work of Descartes: the onto-theology of the *cogitatio* and the onto-theology of the *causa sui*. Such an accomplishment gives him an ambiguous distinction in the history of metaphysics. This new definition of metaphysics is, in Marion's view, metaphysics *tout court*, the ultimate concept of metaphysics. This has essentially three radical implications for Marion. (i) After Descartes, metaphysics essentially is onto-theology, that is to say, primacy of the intentional subject, forgetfulness of the ontological difference, constitution of a self-caused supreme being, reciprocal foundation between Being and beings: "Being grounds beings, and beings, as what *is* most of all, cause Being".¹⁵⁷ (ii) Before Descartes – and this is a decisive point – it is instead possible to identify, in a handful of carefully selected authors, a thought that is still not marked by onto-theology or, more specifically, a theo-logy whose *theos* is still not subjected to metaphysics; a thought that, thanks to the privilege of having happened *before* this *after* that one wants to overcome, can direct our first steps into a new territory.¹⁵⁸ (iii) The "overcoming of metaphysics" advocated by Marion in his works refers exclusively to this modern, post-Cartesian, onto-theological characterization of metaphysics.

This overcoming will entail, in general terms, an attempt to free the absolute or unconditional from the limits imposed by metaphysical logic to human thought and language. The possibility of this overcoming is given by the event of the "end of metaphysics". This represents, for Marion, the direct outcome of the *becoming-intelligible* of metaphysics and the consequent calling into question of the supposed necessity of a universal foundation of being. The definition itself that allows one to capture the

¹⁵⁶ See Marion, *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism*, 103–118.

¹⁵⁷ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 69.

¹⁵⁸ It is the case, for instance, of the thought of Dionysius the Areopagite, but also of Saint Augustine as Marion points out in a recent text: "It could be that Saint Augustine, who does not pose the question of Being, nor even that of being, who therefore does not name God in terms of Being not as the being par excellence, who does not speak the language of the categories of being nor starting from the first among them, οὐσίᾳ, who does not investigate a first ground nor seek it in any *subject* whatsoever (whether one understands it as a substrate or as an ego), does not belong to metaphysics, neither explicitly nor implicitly" (*ISP*, 9). It could be argued that the "step back" (*Schritt zurück*) advocated by Heidegger in the seminal conference on "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics" takes in Marion a different meaning. For Heidegger, the step back represents the methodological attitude with regard to the *entire* history of philosophy, oblivious of the ontological difference (*Identity and Difference*, 49–52). For Marion, the step back amounts to ask whether there are, *within* the history of philosophy, authors to whom the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics does not apply. Simply put, Marion questions Heidegger's suggestion that philosophy must be identified *entirely* with metaphysics.

speculative scope of metaphysics, also sheds light on the limitations of its monolithic structure. The ground, in fact, while it legitimates the metaphysical system, does not legitimate itself and can therefore be questioned and denied. In this sense, the event of the “end of metaphysics” cannot be refuted, as it simply represents the outcome of its conceptual definition. Indeed, this event is assumed by Marion as “a fact of reason” (MP 578). This simple factual evidence, nonetheless, does not entail a complaisance or a submissiveness. Quite the contrary, actually: “As soon as ‘metaphysics’ admits of a concept that is precise, historically verifiable, and theoretically operative, it follows that this concept can undergo a critique proportionate to its limits but also offer, thanks to those very limits, the possible horizon of its overcoming” (MP 578). Simply put, the “end of metaphysics” paves the way for its own end – “the end of the end of metaphysics”.¹⁵⁹

This end – and the end of this end – clearly represents for Marion the fertile soil of present-day philosophy. And his reflection, situating itself on the border region between these endings, is indeed one of the most compelling attempts to fully embrace this moment in the history of philosophy. Now, without denying either this moment or Marion’s enthusiasm for it, it remains to be seen to what extent crossing the metaphysical border is effectively possible. The challenge is, once again, the one highlighted by Heidegger in the seminal lecture on “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics”. A leap needs to be taken, but it is necessary that this leap does not constitute the repetition of the metaphysical project at a new level or in slightly different terms. This – let us note in passing – was essentially the core of the divergence between Derrida and Marion on the hyperbolism of negative theology and will also be the core of their divergence on the topic of prayer. The difficulty – as Heidegger writes – lies in language; it consists in understanding whether the essence of Western languages is inseparable from a metaphysical structure, or whether they store “other possibilities of utterance” which are not caught in the onto-theological net.¹⁶⁰ Marion’s particular attention to religious language in general, and prayer and praise in particular, will testify to this difficulty.

This attempt to push the boundaries of metaphysics can be divided in two paths: a theological and a phenomenological one. Marion’s theological reflection departs from the

¹⁵⁹ This was the title of a paper written by Marion in 1986 (“La fin de la fin de la métaphysique”, *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 42 [1986], 23–43).

¹⁶⁰ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 73.

assumption of “the unsurpassable primacy of Christian revelation” (ID 20). On this basis he interprets the “death of God” as the death of the *metaphysical concept* of God. The “God” who dies is “the being par excellence that operates as and through efficiency such that, in the *metaphysica specialis*, it can thereby ensure a ground for every common being” (MP 579); it is the metaphysical figure of an ultimate foundation on the basis of effectivity or actuality, figure that crosses the entire course of philosophy (Aristotle’s “*enérgeia*”, Aquinas’ “*purus actus*”, Pascal’s “God of the philosophers and the scholars”, Descartes’ “*causa sui*”, Leibniz’s “sufficient Reason”); it is, in brief, an *idol of God*.

From this interpretation follows a statement, rather straightforwardly put in *The Idol and Distance*: the apparent absence or withdrawal of the divine is the ultimate figure of his real presence; God’s “paternal distance” is the primary form of his revelation. This revelation gives itself in the form of a *gift* whose excess and inconceivability overwhelms the receiver to such a degree that it appears to him as absence. The divine absence or distance is then no less than the excess of the gift over the receiver, the call over the response, the Requisite over the Requestant. In the same moment that it exposes the limitation of metaphysical-conceptual language to grasp the divine, this incommensurability also opens the space for a reflection on religious language and, in particular, on the language of prayer.

Marion’s phenomenological reflection departs instead from the denunciation of the phenomenon’s dependence on a different authority than the phenomenon itself: “In the metaphysical realm, the possibility of appearing never belongs to what appears, nor its phenomenality to the phenomenon” (BG 183). The possibility of the phenomenon does not depend on its own phenomenality, but from an external authority which sets its formal conditions: be it Kant’s transcendental subject, Leibniz’s sufficient reason – according to Marion’s examples – or any other a priori principle acting as a ground of the possibility of phenomena’s appearing. This requirement represents for Marion a form of “alienation” and calls for an uprooting of the phenomenon from the limits imposed by metaphysics.

Marion’s response essentially consists in turning the cards on the table: the phenomenon “taken in its fullest sense” does not submit itself to any prior and/or external determination, as it is what “appears without the limits of a horizon or reduction to an I and constitute itself, to the point of giving *itself* as a *self*” (BG 219). This “auto-

manifestation”, “self-showing” or “givenness” (*donation*)¹⁶¹ which imposes its own conditions of appearing, stretches the horizon of both Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology: the former largely concerned with “objects” and “objectness”,¹⁶² the latter essentially narrowed to “beings” and “beingness”. Both philosophers insist on the necessity for phenomena to appear from themselves as they give themselves (this is, after all, the central claim of phenomenology). Both, however, fail to fully satisfy this claim, as they restrict the phenomenal given to objectness and beingness.

The seminal notion of *saturated phenomenon* introduced by Marion, testifies exactly to this attempt at uprooting the phenomenon from the limits imposed by metaphysical principles or previous phenomenological restrictions. According to different variations of auto-manifestation or *degrees of givenness*, phenomena – maintains Marion – can be either “poor” (lacking intuition), “common-law” (varying in terms of intuition) or “saturated” (exceeding in intuition). Notwithstanding this gradation, Marion has insisted almost exclusively on the last ones, describing them as *paradoxes*. In poor and common phenomena signification is reached only through intuitive fulfilment: the intentional subject compensates to the little intuition received and thus imposes on the phenomenon a clear signification. Saturated phenomena, on the contrary, submerge with intuition the expectation of the intention: signification cannot be reached (*BG* 221–225).¹⁶³ The saturated phenomenon is then not a borderline case of manifestation, but rather the accomplishment of the phenomenon’s independence: it appears by itself and from itself, without any horizons defining the possibility of its appearing.

Let us conclude this overview of Marion’s philosophy with a critical observation. Concerning Marion’s insistence on saturation, one might wonder whether experience in general is always so overwhelming and absolute as he often appears to suggest. This question might seem rhetorical, but it allows us to highlight here, as a more general criticism of Marion’s phenomenology, a point which will be laden with consequences for his account of prayer. Christina Gschwandtner, English translator of many of Marion’s

¹⁶¹ This is how Marion translates the term *Gegebenheit*, employed systematically by Husserl, but also by Heidegger, as Marion notes in a series of remarks on this term in *The Reason of the Gift* (trans. Stephen E. Lewis [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011], 35–49). For a criticism of Marion’s translation see, for instance, Éric Alliez, *De l’impossibilité de la phénoménologie. Sur la philosophie française contemporaine* (Paris: Vrin, 1995), 60–66; Janicaud, *Phenomenology “Wide Open”*, 33–40; and Marie-Andrée Ricard, “La question de la donation chez Jean-Luc Marion”, *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 57 (2001), 83–94.

¹⁶² Marion opts for the term “objectness” over “objectivity” because the latter refers to a theory of knowledge, while here it is a matter of a determination of givenness as object (*RT* 75).

¹⁶³ On the *degrees of givenness*, see also *RT* 74–76.

works, has dedicated a book to this specific aspect of Marion's phenomenology, quite aptly entitled *Degrees of Givenness*.¹⁶⁴ She notes that Marion's notion of the saturated phenomenon has become the primary focus of his writings. Following this consideration, she argues that Marion focuses too strongly on the most excessive manifestations of phenomena, seemingly forgetting or disregarding the multiple nuances of human experience, only rarely so sublime and bedazzling. At least to some extent, this prevalence of the extreme can be linked to Marion's insistence on representing religious experience as a "paradigm" for experience in general, an inclination shared also by other authors of the so-called "theological turn" in phenomenology. Gschwandtner, however, rightly maintains that even religious experience and saturated phenomena should be comprehended through a wider spectrum and a richer categorization.

This *polarization of phenomenality* is clearly reflected in Marion's account of prayer. In a chapter dedicated to this specific topic, Gschwandtner stresses how Marion's concern to protect God's radical alterity leads him to represent prayer as a pure, undetermined, and individualistic act of contemplation. Very little is said by him about the communal, ecclesial, ethical and even corporeal aspects of prayer.¹⁶⁵ To this argument, of which we share its general lines, let us add a further observation which will be developed in the following chapter. Marion undoubtedly tends to disregard several dimensions of prayer by focusing almost exclusively on a saturated and reductive form of prayer. This exclusive attention, however, is actually more eloquent than one might think. In fact, it is this very excess that, once pushed to its limits, reveals the *irreducibility* of the phenomenon of prayer to a pure and undetermined form, and the manifold determinations that it can assume.

It is here a matter of some sort of *elucidating mistake*. Just like Derrida, Marion identifies in prayer a performative form of speech able to overcome the metaphysical alternative between affirmation and negation. The consistency of this form of speech is, however, rather impalpable: predication is abandoned and what remains is a pure act of "naming". Nonetheless, just like Derrida had to temper his idea of a pure apostrophe by working on a complementary dialectic of prayer, Marion has to moderate the radical indeterminacy of his discourse by highlighting a certain *logical rigour* of the praising prayer. This rigour is offered by a descriptive statement which, however, inevitably exposes the

¹⁶⁴ Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Degrees of Givenness: On Saturation in Jean-Luc Marion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014).

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 146–169. See also, Christina M. Gschwandtner, "Praise – Pure and Personal? Jean-Luc Marion's Phenomenologies of Prayer", in *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, 168–181.

pure and individualistic prayer to an onto-theological contamination, thereby opening it to plurality, community.

Isomorphism

What, then, do the theological and phenomenological projects represent? Two sides of the same endeavor, or two utterly distinguished paths? While theologians might oppose Marion's extensive use of Heidegger, most criticisms have been turned towards Marion's phenomenology. Phenomenologists have contested the unjustified employment of theological imagery and texts, denouncing a theological hijacking of phenomenology.

Dominique Janicaud, in particular, has raised the latter concern in his notorious text "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology". There he claims that Marion keeps together the problem of the overcoming of metaphysics and the theological or spiritual dimension under the cover of phenomenology, eventually restoring *metaphysica specialis* rather than excluding it. Simply put, according to Janicaud, Marion abandons phenomenological neutrality and does not respect Husserl's methodological indictments of excluding the transcendence of God from the phenomenological field of pure consciousness.¹⁶⁶ In Marion's work, writes Janicaud, "there is no respect for the phenomenological order; it is manipulated as an ever-elastic apparatus, even when it is claimed to be 'strict'".¹⁶⁷ What appears improper to Janicaud's view is in particular the alleged purity of the "call", and the unfolding of a more originary givenness (*donation*). In all their absoluteness, these two ideas would push phenomenology away from common objects and appearances. The problem is clearly one of *methodological orthodoxy*. Janicaud's perspective entails a return to the original Husserlian inspiration of phenomenology, a return to the investigation of the "things themselves". For him, this entails the deployment of the most radical *epoché* for what concerns the question of God and the possibility of his manifestation, and an exclusive focus on the field of immanent phenomenality.

The essential issue with this criticism is that it excludes any possible intermediate alternatives. Janicaud's speaks according to an *ant-ant* rhetoric; by following his

¹⁶⁶ Husserl, *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology (Ideas I)*, ch. 4, §58, 134.

¹⁶⁷ Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology", 65.

denunciation, one reaches a crossroads: *either* the rigorous investigation of the mode of appearing of the “things themselves” according to the respect of the Husserlian inspiration, *or* the abandonment of phenomenological neutrality through the illicit introduction of transcendence within the field. This essentially means: *either* one does phenomenology, *or* one does theology. There are however two issues with this rigid alternative. Firstly, as we have already pointed out in the introduction, phenomenology’s “original” inspiration is not as inflexible as Janicaud seems to assume, especially for what concerns the inclusion or exclusion of transcendence from the field of phenomenality. Secondly, for what concerns the specific case of Marion’s works, the problem cannot be reduced to an alternative between the respect of or the deviation from phenomenology’s orthodoxy.

Nonetheless, there is a reason if Janicaud’s criticism of Marion holds its ground. This is at least partially due to the fact that Marion has insisted on maintaining a clear-cut opposition between theology and phenomenology, rather than pointing out where these two fields might meet in his work, and why this might not constitute an issue for phenomenology. In other words, one could argue that Marion’s reaction is as rigid as Janicaud’s criticism: *either* phenomenology, *or* theology; no possible meeting ground between the two. In response to the charge of founding his phenomenology on the theological concern to free the manifestation of God from idolatry, Marion has put an emphasis on the stark difference between the two fields of research. “Between phenomenology and theology” – he writes in a text quite emblematically entitled “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology” – “the border passes between revelation as possibility and revelation as historicity. There could be no danger of confusion between these domains” (MP 590). And in a more detailed note of *Being Given* he writes:

Phenomenology describes possibilities and never considers the phenomenon of revelation except as a possibility of phenomenality [...]. To be sure, *Revelation* (as actuality) is never confounded with *revelation* (as possible phenomenon) [...]. But phenomenology, which owes it to phenomenality to go this far, does not go beyond and should never pretend to decide the fact of Revelation, its historicity, its actuality, or its meaning. It should not do so, not only out of concern for distinguishing the sciences and delimiting their respective regions, but first of all, because it does not have the means to do so. The fact (if there is one) of Revelation exceeds the scope of all science, including that of phenomenology. Only

a theology, and on condition of constructing itself on the basis of this fact alone (Karl Barth or Hans Urs von Balthasar, no doubt more than Rudolf Bultmann or Karl Rahner), could reach it. Even if it had the desire to do so (and, of course, this would never be the case), phenomenology would not have the power to turn into theology. And one has to be completely ignorant of theology, its procedures, and its problematic not to imagine this unlikeness. (BG 367n90).

The distinction is then between the *possibility* of givenness itself and the *actuality* of the gift of revelation. Phenomenology cannot say anything about the historical actuality or the meaning of the phenomenon of Christian Revelation and can only treat it as a potential occurrence. Theology, instead, presupposes the historical actuality of Christian Revelation, thus remaining essentially distinct from phenomenology. The possible *point of arrival* of phenomenology – the possibility of a full revelation of the saturated phenomenon – is the actual *point of departure* of theology – the historicity of Christian revelation. This is essentially the reason why these two paths remain, for Marion, distant from each other.

At a closer look, however, this emphasis on the difference between the two domains, allows one to grasp where they actually meet. Marion's clarification, in fact, is not entirely neutral. As Thomas Carlson points out, this passage already implies a precise idea of revelation (that of Barth and Balthasar) and the exclusion of another (that of Rahner and Bultmann). Furthermore, Marion's idea of Revelation as a giving through absence, withdrawal or distance depends on a reflection on the idol and icon which heavily relies on phenomenological method. Thus Carlson concludes: "If it is true, then, that Marion's phenomenology is not, or does not intend to be, in any straightforward way a theology, it is also true that his theology and phenomenology inform one another more or otherwise than Marion himself might allow" (ID xv).

All in all, it then seems that the two phases remain connected, despite Marion's effort to hold them distinct. Some structural similarities are evident even in the brief excursus we have laid out. In this sense, Carlson has quite rightly spoken of an *isomorphism* between theological and phenomenological reflection in Marion (ID xxxi). This does not in any way diminish Marion's reflections: it does not really dissolve his phenomenology into a theology, as Janicaud maintains. It simply helps to understand that Marion's theology and phenomenology deeply inform one another and that by reading these two

projects together we might learn a great deal about their points of interplay. Prayer, we would like to suggest, is perhaps one of the most interesting ones.

Idol, icon, distance

In its more specifically theological declination, Marion's endeavour to cross the borders of metaphysics takes the shape of a reflection on particular forms of religious experience and language. The interest for the language of prayer is to be located within the space of this reflection. The first steps in this direction are taken in *The Idol and Distance*, whose fundamental question – “What language can be suitable to distance?” (ID 139) – will guide our analysis in the following pages. The better-known *God Without Being*, in which Marion puts forward the notorious argument that God is not subject to the ontological instance and that traditional ontological language is inadequate for what regards the divine, constitutes an ideal continuation of the questioning already contained in *The Idol and Distance*. These two texts could indeed be read next to each other, especially if one focuses on the deployment of three fundamental terms of Marion's entire thought: the *idol*, the *icon*, and *distance*.

Starting from the first two, a clarification is immediately required. These are terms whose etymology ties them to a purely aesthetic-visual rather than linguistic-philosophical sphere: the Greek *eidolon* meaning “phantom”, “image”, as a derivative of *eidōs* (“form”, “shape”, “figure”, “sight”), in turn coming from *eidō* (“see”, “look”, “perceive”); and *eikon* meaning “likeness”, “image” from *eoika* (“to be like”, “look like”, “seem”).¹⁶⁸ Moreover, these are also terms whose simple usage immediately evokes a long-standing discussion around the status of religious simulacra. Nonetheless, in these early texts Marion shows no interest in the aesthetic value of these words or in the historical polemic surrounding their significance as two kinds of works of art. Right at the outset of *God Without Being*, he actually discards the “image question”, maintaining that in using the concepts of *eidolon* and *eikon*, it is not a matter of reinvigorating the diatribe between “pagan art” and “Christian art”. A more fundamental conflict is actually veiled by the opposition between these two image-heavy words. A conflict that is not played out between two opposite

¹⁶⁸ See Liddel and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, εἶδωλον, 483; εἰκόν, 485.

models of art or classes of beings which – as Marion admits – can easily pass from one class to the other, depending on reasons external to them: “The Christian iconoclasts of the eight century gave the name ‘idol’ to that which had been conceived and venerated as icon of the true God, and the Jews of the Old Covenant rejected all representation as idolatrous, even representation of the God of the Covenant” (*GW*B 8).

If the idol and the icon cannot simply represent two beings in conflict with each other is then because the determination of these beings is made impossible by their historical status shifting, depending on their veneration or their disdain. It follows that the opposition between these two terms must be played out at a far more essential level. According to Marion, “the historical succession of two models of ‘art’ permits one to disclose a *phenomenological conflict* – a conflict between two phenomenologies” (*GW*B 7, emphasis added). The historical controversy dissimulates a phenomenological tension. For Marion, this entails a radical change of register: it is no longer a matter of speaking of the idol and the icon as different kinds of beings or classes of beings, but rather as different *manners of being for beings* or different *modes of apprehension of the divinity*, both at the level of what can be seen (visible/invisible) and of what can be said (sayable/unsayable).

Despite Marion cursory shift to a purely phenomenological analysis, one might ask whether there exists a relationship between the idol and the icon as manners of being for beings, and the idol and icon as beings or classes of beings. The question could be posed in the following terms: is *every* being able to give rise to an idolatrous or iconic apprehension? Clearly one must answer negatively. And Marion does it as well, albeit with a prudence that could easily go unnoticed: “Icon and idol indicate a manner of being for beings” – he writes – “*or at least for some of them*” (*GW*B 7, emphasis added). This goes to say, clearly enough, that not every being can demand veneration as idol or icon. Only the ones – Marion clarifies soon after – “that art has so worked that they no longer restrict their visibility to themselves [...], but, as such and by thus remaining absolutely immanent in themselves, that they signal indissolubly toward another, still undetermined term” (*GW*B 8). This is then the aesthetic-ontological quality through which a being can obtain the status of idol or icon: an excess of visibility that lacerates the shell of immanence of the artwork, thereby offering a glimpse of transcendence. Even though for Marion the phenomenological manner of apprehension pertains to a more essential dimension – in that it is the mode of apprehension that ultimately makes the idol *idol* and the icon *icon* –

one can then conclude that an analysis of the idol and the icon as different kinds of images reveals itself necessary.¹⁶⁹

It is nonetheless the phenomenological declination of the idol-icon tension that allows Marion to situate these categories against the background of the problematic concerning the history of metaphysics and the onto-theological conception of God. In fact, at a closer look the comparative phenomenology of the idol and the icon constitutes the backbone of the whole reflection carried out in *The Idol and Distance* and *God Without Being*. This phenomenology comprises a description of the idol and the icon in terms of the infinite distance between God and man which can be either fixed or crossed.

What distinguishes the idol, according to Marion, is a subjection of the divine to the human conditions of its experience. Treating the divine as “prey to be captured”,¹⁷⁰ the idolatrous apprehension gives a false assurance of divine presence. False, but not illusory, as the idol is indeed, “that which is seen”. Following Marion’s considerations, one could even speak of a *distorted presence*: presence entirely measured by the scope of the human gaze. The relation between human gaze and idol is constitutive. The idol is certainly erected with the intention to attract the gaze; everything in it must fill the order of representation. But it is the human gaze what actually *makes* the idol: “The fabricated thing becomes an idol, that of a god, only from the moment when the gaze has decided to fall on it, has made of it the privileged fixed point of its own consideration” (*GWB* 10).

From this follows that all the characteristics of the idol are to be traced back to the human gaze. The topology of the idol is that of an *invisible mirror* on whose surface the gaze stops and is reflected back. The image that is returned is nothing more than the subjective projection of the divine. Projection that, once fixed permanently in the idol, offers an always available apprehension of the divinity. The mirror remains invisible because the gaze, in its craving for attaining the divine, discovers its own limitation: its insatiable desire for visibility is satisfied by the dazzling image of its own reflection, which fills the gaze, saturating it with visibility. This is the reason why the human gaze, blinded by a ravishing image, cannot raise its aim beyond the idol, toward the invisible. In abolishing distance, the idol encloses the divine, it bends it and reduces it to the measure

¹⁶⁹ An analysis of this kind is carried out in the last chapter of *The Crossing of the Visible*, entitled “The Prototype and the Image” (*CV* 66–87).

¹⁷⁰ *Philippians* 2:6.

of the human subjective gaze, ultimately presenting no more than a “low-water mark of the divine” (*GWB* 14).

In the comparative phenomenological analysis carried out by Marion, the icon is the perfect counterpoint to the subjective manner of apprehension exemplified by the idol. The norm expressed by the icon is encapsulated in Saint Paul’s formulation, “icon of the invisible God”.¹⁷¹ This expresses an inversion of the logic of the idol: while the idol is the outcome of a vision, the icon is the cause of a vision; while the idol is the object of a gaze, the icon is the subject of an appearance. In the iconic apprehension it is then not the visible that attempts to grasp the invisible, but rather the invisible entering the visible; not the gaze that freezes on a visible and is reflected onto itself, but the gaze that is summoned to surpass the visible and rise toward the invisible. Strictly speaking, the gaze, in the phenomenology of the icon, belongs not to man but to the icon itself. If in the idol the human experience has precedence over the divine, in the icon is the divine that saturates human perception – the invisible which, by entering into visibility, surprises the gaze with its excess.

What is at play in the icon is then not the reflection of human subjective experience, but the paradoxical *re-velatio* (revelation *and* concealment) of the invisible as such. In the attempt to identify a matching opponent of the topology of the invisible mirror, Marion advances for the icon a typology of the *optical prism* (*ID* 8). Despite the commendable intention, this image, compared to one of the invisible mirror, is clearly unable to fully grasp the complexity of the phenomenology of the icon. Not accidentally, Marion employs it only briefly in *The Idol and Distance*, abandoning it in the later *God Without Being*.¹⁷² We can nonetheless try to develop it in order to better capture the staggering difference between the icon and the idol. The couple *idol-mirror* entails an abolition of distance, a mere reflection of human subjective experience which gives a closed and graspable image of the divine. The couple *icon-prism*, on the contrary, entails a manifestation of distance, a visible chromatic dispersion which signals toward the irreducible invisibility of the divine.¹⁷³ It is no longer a matter of making God available by

¹⁷¹ *Colossians* 1:15.

¹⁷² This figure makes another appearance in *On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism*. In this different context, the image is used in the sense of the *breaking up* into different dimensions of the apparent unity of Descartes’ thought.

¹⁷³ In fact, the example of the prism in *The Idol and Distance* essentially serves Marion as a figure of the passage from the visible to the invisible. This is clear in the brief remark that follows the mention of this peculiar figure: “In the art of the icon, the codified colors (gold, red, blue, yellow, etc.) do not resemble any ‘thing’ that is supposed to be intrinsically colored thus; their significance is affirmed within a purely

permanently fixing it in a graspable image, but rather of highlighting distance by opening up the space of a communion of visibility and invisibility, human gaze and God's gaze. The static quality of the idol is supplanted by the essentially dynamic nature of the icon. The icon is "the site of a reciprocal transition [...] the instrument of a communion" (CV 86).

Now, Marion maintains that both idol and icon can "proceed" conceptually (GWB 16). This essentially means that not only statues, figures and images, but also names, concepts and linguistic models can obtain the peculiar rank of idol and icon. These terms, image-heavy as they are, should not once again deceive us and draw us into thinking that at stake, in this comparative phenomenology, is merely a perception of visual character. The phenomenological tension between idol and icon, in fact, is not played out exclusively in the domain of the visible-invisible, but also in the domain of the sayable-unsayable. In reality, the linguistic-conceptual apprehension of the divine is, for Marion, the one that most defines the horizon of Western metaphysical thought. It is therefore also the one towards which are directed most of his efforts.

The concept, intended at first according to its etymology as the attribution to a sign of the grasp of the mind (*concipere, capere*), perfectly re-enacts the hermeneutic of the idol:

Such a grasp is measured not so much by the amplitude of the divine as by the scope of a *capacitas*, which can fix the divine in a specific concept only at the moment when a conception of the divine fills it, hence appeases, stops, and freezes it. When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names "God", this concept functions exactly as an idol. It gives itself to be seen, but thus all the better conceals itself as the mirror where thought, invisibly, has its forward point fixed, so that the *invisible* finds itself, with an aim suspended by the fixed concept, disqualified and abandoned; thought freezes, and the idolatrous concept of "God" appears, where, more than God, thought judges itself. (GWB 16).

In the philosophical concept we find encapsulated all the constitutive elements of the idol: the subjugation of the divine to the scope of the human grasp, the fixed and always available apprehension of the divinity, the disqualification of distance. The concept

semiotic (in this case liturgical) field, where they announce eternity, divinity, glory, humanity, etc. The colors serve in no way as signs of visible things that one would have to give to be seen [...]. They signal from the visible to the irreducible invisibility that it is a question of producing, of making advance into the visible inasmuch as invisible" (ID 8–9).

as idol acts as a filter of the divine's foreignness, offering us a presence without distance, a familiar experience of God. What Marion has in mind here is a discursive attitude typical of the overconfident theoretical procedures of certain philosophy or intellectual theology. From this, his aversion (following Heidegger) to a whole series of conceptual figures of the Western metaphysical tradition exemplified, for instance, by Pascal's "God of the philosophers and the scholars", Spinoza's "God as infinite and unique substance", Nietzsche's "death of God", among others; and, above all, the crowning achievement of onto-theological thinking – God as *causa sui*.

This aversion, in all its radicality, does not entail a passive acceptance. In Marion's view, the moment of the twilight of all idols lets us glimpse a new dawn: that of an iconic apprehension of the divine. The icon too, in fact, can proceed conceptually, albeit on one fundamental condition: "that the concept renounce comprehending the incomprehensible, to attempt to conceive it, hence also to receive it, in its own excessiveness" (*GWB* 22–23). In other words, the concept would have to respect the hermeneutic of the icon: the welcoming of distance, the excessiveness of the invisible entering visibility, the abandonment of absolute knowledge. In short: if the conceptual idol lets itself be measured by the grasp of the human capacity, the conceptual icon, on the contrary, would have to let itself be measured by the excessiveness of the divine. But can such a concept actually be conceived? Can a concept actually renounce comprehending?

Here nothing less than the theoretical scope of the concept is at stake. The shift is radical, as it is evident in the following passage: "It is not a question of using a concept to determine an essence but of using it to determine an intention – that of the invisible advancing into the visible and inscribing itself therein by the very reference it imposes from this visible to the invisible" (*GWB* 23). Notice here the slight but significant shift of accent that opens onto a theological perspective. The idol as concept attempts to obtain absolute knowledge of the essence of the divine: the intention is here the purely immanent one of the human gaze moved towards the apprehension of the divine essence. The icon as concept reverses this apprehension: the intention is the transcendent one of the invisible entering the visible and offering itself as reference of the visible. This reversion, which cannot but recall the paradoxical "counter-experience" of the saturated

phenomenon later described by Marion,¹⁷⁴ highlights distance: the absolute distinction between visible and invisible. At the same time, however, it also allows for a crossing of distance, a mutual commerce of transference between visible and invisible: “The invisible envisages (as invisible) only in passing to the visible (as face), whereas the visible only presents to sight (as visible) in passing to the invisible (as intention)” (*GW*B 23).

It is then evident that only the concept or group of concepts that will be able to emphasize at the same time the disunion and the union of visible and invisible can obtain the status of icon. This is the perspective opened by the icon which we will have to investigate. It will be a matter of understanding whether it is possible to formulate an *iconic language*. That is to say, whether there is a form of utterance capable of sustaining and crossing the infinite distance that separates God from man, or are our utterance inevitably aiming at the exhaustion of this distance. If the icon – writes Marion – “gives only the invisible to be seen”, an iconic language “would therefore have to give only the unsayable to be said” (*GW*B 183). These remarks bring us back to what we have judged as the core questioning of *The Idol and Distance*: “What language can be suitable to distance?” (*ID* 139).

As we shall now see, the answer of Marion is *prayer*, and more specifically, the *prayer which praises*. Marion understands it as a rather complex language game which, in aiming towards God, is capable of holding together the rigour of precise language and the respect of distance, thus escaping metaphysics. Of the many issues that this form of language will pose, let us here briefly highlight one in reference to another perspective open by the icon. Marion puts it in the following terms: “The icon has a theological status, the reference of the visible face to the intention that envisages, culminating in the reference of the Christ to the Father: for the formula *eikōn tou theou tou aoratou* concerns first the Christ” (*GW*B 23). Not just a theological status, then, but a specifically Christian one, which would establish Saint Paul’s formula as a prescriptive principle for every icon. Should one then expect the iconic language of praise to have a Christian theological status as well, perhaps – one could speculate – culminating in the reference of the Christ to the

¹⁷⁴ “I cannot have vision of these phenomena, because I cannot constitute them starting from a univocal meaning, and even less produce them as objects. What I see of them, if I see anything of them that *is*, does not result from the constitution I would assign to them in the visible, but from the effect they produce on me. And, in fact, this happens in reverse, so that my look is submerged, in a counter-intentional manner. Then I am no longer the transcendental *I* but rather the witness, constituted by what happens to him or her. Hence the para-dox, inverted *doxa*. In this way, the phenomenon that befalls and happens to us reverses the order of visibility in that it no longer results from my intention but from its own counter-intentionality” (Marion, *In Excess*, 113).

Father in the *Pater Noster* or in the reciprocal glorification of Son and Father in Christ's prayer before the arrest?¹⁷⁵

Marion does not delve into this. Nonetheless, his analysis on prayer sets out from the theology of the author who identifies himself with Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian convert of Paul the Apostle. To a certain extent, one could say that it never moves far from the invocation of the Trinity beyond Being at the outset of *The Mystical Theology*. The Christian-theological background is preserved in the iconic depths of language. With this, also the always possible accusation of the kind of the one moved by Derrida: "How can one deny that the encomium qualifies God and *determines* prayer, *determines* the other [...]?" How can one deny that [...] the appointment of the *trinitary* and hyperessential God distinguishes Dionysius' *Christian* prayer from all other prayer? (HAS 111). In other words, if the iconic language of praise maintains an essentially Christian status, it will never be possible to rigorously exempt it from the risk of a theological determination, as Marion would hope. The slippage into determination, as Derrida would put it, would remain inevitable.

¹⁷⁵ *Matthew* 6:9–13; *John* 17:1–5.

