AN INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-LUC MARION, GADAMER CHAIR AT BOSTON COLLEGE

§1: INTRODUCTION ABOUT PROF. MARION'S TEACHING AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF GIVENNESS

Sky Lyu, Managing Editor Prof. Marion, you were appointed Gadamer chair in 2020 and during the past four years, have given lectures and taught courses. One of the most interesting and common comments from my peers about your philosophy is that it is very "healing," since it offers a philosophical hope for them. So did you expect this impact to students and what would your mission be through your teachings here?

Jean-Luc Marion I'm sorry some students had suffered some intellectual disease. But I would be glad that my philosophy may heal, because (bad) philosophy can harm as well as a good one may help. But this was not intended: I am doing philosophy, without predetermined outcomes or any apologetic intention. However, a clear distinction could be drawn between what we may call metaphysics, and what we may call phenomenology, that is, between *a priori* or closed philosophy (closed as once it was spoken of the "closing of the American mind") and phenomenology—which has a long history because it started around the beginning of the 19th century—which today is perhaps the opening, or reopening of philosophy. Perhaps, perhaps it is a positive experience for those who are interested in that [reopening]. That's the difference: in the perspective of phenomenology, as Heidegger said once, higher than the effectivity, stands the possibility. On the opposite, metaphysics—in analytical philosophy, formal philosophy, systematic idealism—the possibility is left behind the effectivity, encapsulated within objectivity.

Elliott Jones, Managing Editor For our introductory readers, what is the role phenomenology has had in the history of philosophy? More particularly: your work is frequently cited in theological discussions. What do you believe your work can offer theology in contemporary dialogue?

JLM You understand that it is impossible to answer that kind of question shortly. What I can tell, is that I started by asking questions about the questions: philosophy should proceed that way, by asking new questions. So in my first books about the question of God and *The Idol and Distance* and *God without Being*, I questioned the question, very widespread in the seventies, whether we can truly *think* that "God is dead". And I made the point that the death of God means that what dies was by definition not God. And if not God, what was it? It was an idol. Saying that, I was just repeating what Nietzsche had already said. Idols are the main concepts of philosophy—including the concepts of being, cause, consciousness, free will, and so on. And you can verify it easily provided you are an historian of philosophy (which is what I started out trying to be, studying Descartes and Aristotle). And we have to destroy idols, whatever they are. And curiously, in that case, God does not stand on the side of the idols. In fact, "God is dead" means only that what we thought as a dead God was simply no God at all. And so, to some extent, the "death of God" reopened the question of God. That was the first paradox.

How far this is connected with phenomenology? It may be absolutely no connection in so far as this is a *theological* argument. But phenomenology means a kind of philosophy which allows you to ask whether concepts supposed to be completely beyond ordinary question within philosophy might not be questioned as well. Another example: even if to know is to know an object (limited and certain), knowledge is not *only* the subjective construction of the object. The opposition, subjectivity/objectivity, though admitted by roughly everyone, does not stand. If you study the history of philosophy, you discover that the object is always connected with the subject and that both concepts were born at the same period. For the ancient Greeks, there was no object, and there was no subject. And what is the modern definition of the object? Something which can be perfectly well known by the subject—because, in the sciences, for example, it was *built* by the subject. So the fact that any object is constituted by a subject means that nothing is more subjective than objectivity.

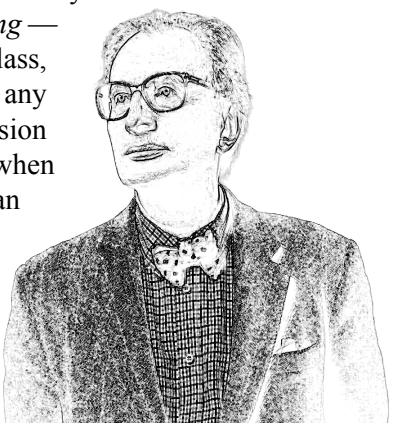
Something is said to be objective which has become the same objectified by a community of qualified subjects. So objectivity amounts only to an intersubjectivity. And all philosophers today will agree to that. Therefore the idea that science is objective means only that within science there is an agreement between subjects. But in other fields we discover other different agreements between subjects which lead to other kinds of intersubjectivity: in art, in morals, in politics, and in religion. So there is no absolute border. The question lies in understanding how we reach non-objective knowledge about what cannot nevertheless be constituted by us. And so the divide between objective science and subjective science appears problematic.

EJ What you said about idols leads to the next question. You spoke about the history of philosophy and these metaphysical constraints or "idols", and how they limit our understanding—limit us from talking about certain phenomena. What are these metaphysical idols and why is phenomenology and your work a solution beyond them?

JLM I think that metaphysics was and remains a very successful endeavor. Being hard to produce intelligibility, the achievement of metaphysics was to say: we may know in advance everything certainly by using the same set of concepts and of principles, categories, and determinations, in whatever field we work in. For instance, one of the most famous principles we use: avoid contradictory definitions, the principle of identity. Or again: we should always be able to give a reason for whatever we claim to exist or be thought; any sentence has to be proved by reasons, hence the principle of sufficient reason. Having those principles (and all sciences use those standards), we have to stick to them and reject any other knowledge which could not yield to them as non-objective–a non-object for science. The problem is that we quite often meet with phenomena which contradict those standards, and does appear without doubt. Should we not, in those cases, modify our standards? De facto, from time to time, we can't not modify those standards. So we have in modern fundamental physics. So the today question amounts to when and how to modify the standards to fit some phenomena, or whether or how we are allowed to modify the phenomena if they don't fit the old standards. And in phenomenology, we deal with the same question: are there phenomena which don't yield to any previously known paradigm and nevertheless impose themselves beyond question. Among them, God, for God is an exception by definition. Would it not be the case, this "god" would not be God. Let us consider, for instance, the impossible. We universally admit that nothing is impossible, because, were

something impossible to a God, then this "god" would not deserve to be admitted as God.

A similar remark can be expressed about man: there is no definition of man, not of man-hood, nor of the humanity of man; not only is there no definition, but there *should be* no definition of man, for any definition of man, imposed by, for example, a political leader or political regime, this leads to totalitarianism. Why a totalitarian definition of man would be a threat? Not only because it will prove very likely *wrong* — a definition on based race, social class, religion, and so on — but because any definition would result in an exclusion by a persecution. In other words, when any official definition of what a man is allows the disqualification and the exclusion of those individuals who doesn't apply to it, by constraint or even terror. Activists use the word "genocide" too easily; however genuine genocide means more the mass murder, it means suppressing human beings as *non-human being,* on the basis of a definition of what is human and what is not. *This* is genocide, which kills all the more, kills the body because it denies first the soul of mankind. So war itself is not yet a real genocide, though violent and mortal, remaining in some cases unavoidable.



This leads to a remark about history: history is not a science, a very serious field of study, but it is not a science, because it cannot make any prediction and prove any law by rehearsing any experience…And why not? Because history means either the study of the past or what is going on in the present; however what is going on never pertains to a chain of objects occurring by strict determinism. There is properly no determinism in history. Not because there is no cause— on the opposite, there are too many of them — but because no one can predict it. There was someone who made himself famous by predicting that we have reached the end of history, the whole humanity having agreed about free market, global capitalism and democracy…

SL Fukuyama?

JLM No name dropping, please. But we are aware that this was not the case, for history refers only to the unexpected, the unpredictable, to the events in time, not to objects in determinism. And the event comes as what is *not yet,* afar of any strict chain of objects. I would not say it comes out of the blue, but dare say that it comes from *elsewhere*. And it is why we should not master the event, but only to face it and *answer it.*

Another case that is central to my work: is the question of the "gift". At least, provided that we do not interpret it as a mere exchange, which alone pertains to economy (*do ut des*), transferring the possession of an object from one owner to another through the mean of money, which is enough an objective interpretation of the exchange. But the gift is *not* an exchange, because it has no sufficient reason, no good (or bad) reason to give. It needs no reason at all, and it is why it remains always possible always. No reason, because it is based on inequality and non-reciprocity. Expecting no fair return, it frees itself from any possibility of being paid back, and, admitting no condition of possibility, it has not condition of possibility, To that extent the gift appears always unequal, unfair, not about justice, but beyond it. Those cases, the unknowability of man, the incomprehensibility of God, the gratuity of the gift, or the unpredictability of history— all of these become intelligible, if to some they may be explained, only by contradicting the usual understanding of the beings, produced by metaphysics.

§2: PHENOMENOLOGY OF GIVENNESS AS A BREAKTHROUGH. WHAT DOES IT OPEN FOR US, AND WHAT IS THE RISK?

SL We finally get to the "gift". I think that your phenomenology or the phenomenology of "givenness" is somehow a breakthrough of traditional phenomenology. So, to facilitate discussion, let's situate ourselves in a context. I want to bring in here the dialogue between you and Derrida, conducted by Prof. Kearney. It was a fascinating dialogue of course. But during the dialogue Derrida made a heavy critique saying that your phenomenology is without "as such"; and you responded by pushing back even further, stating: "A real phenomenology would be to give up the concept of the horizon"—which is opposed to Levinas. To this extent, your phenomenology of "givenness" *is* a radical breakthrough, departing from traditional phenomenology. But the question remains, to what

extent is it still a phenomenology?

JLM Because there is nothing like *a* phenomenology *as such*—I agree on this point with Derrida, as well as with Heidegger. There is nevertheless an ongoing tradition of thinkers who each time claimed to make a breakthrough against their predecessors, but on the same track. So Husserl made a breakthrough by enlarging the realm of intuition, and he made similar breakthroughs during all of his lifetime. So Heidegger admitted that he has killed the father again with a breakthrough to the question of Being. Likewise Levinas made a breakthrough against Heidegger by saying that ontology is *not* fundamental, and ethics is. And Derrida make a breakthrough with deconstruction, and so on. So each phenomenology is made by those who disagree with the previous phenomenologists by *relying* on them. And that's why phenomenology keeps going. I don't know whether I deserve to be listed among them, but, anyway I kept going that way. If you dare to criticize Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida, Levinas or Michel Henry, it is because you *agree* with the questions and only intend to go a step forward. To criticize a philosopher is not to contradict him, but to jump beyond his last jump. If you break a record in sports, you don't erase the previous one, but improve it; in philosophy we do the same. Real philosophers don't properly disagree, but try to use, in a better way, the result of the previous one.

So now, let's go to the question of horizon. Indeed there is a horizon for regular phenomena: each phenomenon makes sense in the horizon of other related phenomena, within which a new one can be situated and seen. However there are cases where there is no horizon, because any comparison remains impossible—for instance, with the case of the event, the case of God. There is no horizon to the question of God because God is unconditioned, cannot be compared; for, if it could be compared, it would not mean God. Otherwise, God is incomprehensible, because, would it be comprehended by us, it would not mean God. And so on. So, in that case, we have no horizon. And, when Derrida told me that the "gift" is impossible because, as soon as a gift is identified as a gift, it is cancelled as a gift, and reduced to an exchange— he was absolutely correct. But, nevertheless, the "gift" can be done, possible for us *or not*. So, the impossibility of the gift means that the gift has no sufficient reason, cannot be reduced to an object, to an exchange, but, provided it is reduced to givenness, includes its own impossibility. And Derrida and I agreed about that— the impossibility of the gift—, but we disagreed about its meaning: far from erasing the phenomenon of the gift, I acknowledge that this very impossibility enacts the "gift". In other

words, the intersection between the possible in the impossible cannot apply here.

SL If the "gift" is possible, does it have risks? Just as John J. Caputo remarks: "Do we not come into a universal indebted-ness to God the giver, even though the gift has been released from a causal economy?". Would the "gift" then be dangerous?

JLM The gift is indeed dangerous, it even may be seen as the most dangerous, the *deinotaton* [of Sophocles']. About God, if meant as the Christian God, indeed we are all indebted to God, if only because God has loved (i.e. created) us before we even were.

SL Already?

JLM Already. It's done, to late to be denied. We try to deny our indebtness because we are obsessed by it, and this denial appears as its confirmation. That this situation may look to some extent both frightening and comforting, I fully agree. So, I understand quite well why so many people want practically to be atheists, just in order to get rid of this – this what? This opening of the horizon. Yes, willingly or not, we are completely in debt to God.

SL I love your analysis of the excessive, saturated phenomenon—for example, revelation. And it seems to me a key to solve Derrida's impossibility. Do you think this kind of excessiveness exists in other areas, for example, psychoanalysis, or hermeneutics, or even aesthetics? Do you think the analysis of such excessiveness in other areas could open new possibilities?

JLM Indeed, there is no question about that. Saturated phenomena or excessiveness, if you prefer, identify themselves by an excess of intuition with no matching concept; this provides us with the only explanation about the question of aesthetic beauty, where we all agree on the intuition, when we find us unable to explain that agreement by common concepts. And in regular psychoanalysis, many people use the word "object", although clearly desire has no object and "object" sounds like an appropriate word. So when I say "given" or "saturated" phenomenon, that means something, which can be better used. As indeed it can be used in the interest of philosophy. In philosophy, the best way to get confirmation that something you thought and you've discovered is right is that it can be used by non-philosophers in their own field. And so I am very glad to see that "saturated phenomenon" is used in theology, in aesthetics, in music—for instance, "saturated sound"— as well as the distinc-

tion, say, between icon and idol is used in the theory of painting today. So the vocation of philosophy is not first to be discussed by professional philosophers alone (they are living doing their job, doing their trade in their discussion, which looks good). But real achievement in philosophy consist in working out notions, concepts, arguments which can be used by non-philosophers.

§3: QUESTIONS FROM DIANOIA READERS

SL I'm sure you are tired of our philosophy questions. So here is a questions from one of our readers. Janice is a freshman at Boston College in the philosophy department. And she learned from one of your interviews that in your youth, when the academy was full of big names like Lacan and Derrida, you secretly received instruction of theology, outside the campus. She is actually doing the same thing. She has founded a Lacanian psychoanalysis group called "Sinthome" outside the campus and they are doing lectures to teach themselves every week. So how do you view this kind of off-campus group—interest- or even faith-based study? And do you have any advice for her?

JLM I think that any serious study is self-taught study. When you go to the university you have tutors, but you study by yourself. As I've told my students at the Sorbonne and elsewhere: What matters is how many difficult books you have read. The most difficult are the best. So my classes, the classes I and my colleagues give, are just to help you to read those books. If you can read them without sitting in my class, please don't take my class. Read! And this is what I have done. There were many boring classes at my university. I skipped them. Or I was reading during the class. And it is the best thing the professor could expect from me.

SL Great, I will tell her the same thing!

§4: PROF. MARION'S ADVICE FOR UNDERGRADUATE PHILOSOPHY STUDENTS

EJ So our last question, which you've partly already answered: You say to your students "we should only read books we don't understand," be-

cause it allows us to philosophize about what we don't understand. Now besides your books, of course, do you have any advice on other books or questions that the next generation of philosophers ought to philosophize about or read. And secondly, what about the vast history of philosophy and how would you give advice to rising philosophy majors for finding their niche in this two-thousand-plus year history?

JLM To study philosophy is to read—if possible in the original languages—Plato, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and his treatise *On the Soul*, some Augustine, Descartes, Kant, as well as those around Kant (like Hume), Husserl, Heidegger and so on.

SL Not Hegel?

JLM Yes, but only after reading Kant. Don't start with Hegel, because Hegel is based on Aristotle and Kant,…and on theology. So don't try from the beginning to find a small niche for your PhD or something like that. Try to go into the regions you have never visited before. And then you will see.

EJ Professor Marion, we thank you very much for your time, it has been a real gift.

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