

The Insistent and Unbearable Excess: On Experience (and God) in Marion's Phenomenology

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In discussions concerning metaphysics, phenomenology, and what might come after phenomenology, what constitutes “experience” emerges as an important question. Central to Husserlian phenomenology is the notion of *Erlebnis*, “lived experience” (in French, *vécu*), to which the corresponding verb is *erleben* (*vivre*—to live, or to live through; *éprouver*—to suffer, test, personally appreciate, feel). Experience as *Erlebnis* is a mental process, an item of consciousness.¹ Yet experience also has a broader sense, expressed in the German *Erfahrung* (in French, *expérience*); “to experience” is *erfahren* (*expérimenter*—to test or examine; *subir*—to undergo; *porter*—to bear; *faire l'expérience*—to experience, *éprouver*).² As Martin Jay observes, *Erfahrung* “is sometimes associated with outer, sense impressions or with cognitive judgments about them (especially in the tradition associated with

1. Unlike Kant, for Husserl this includes the unity of consciousness as transcendental or constitutive. See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 98–100, 118–19. See also Jay's comment: “Although *erleben* is a transitive verb and implies an experience of something, *Erlebnis* is often taken to imply a primitive unity prior to any differentiation or objectification.” Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Ewing, NJ: University of California Press, 2004) 11. For a helpful summary of the meanings of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, see Kevin Hart, “The Experience of the Kingdom of God,” *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*, ed. Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 71–86, 73.

2. *Erleben* = “vivre [R, EE], éprouver [B, EE]”; *Erfahren* = “expérimenter [R, B], subir [R, B], porter [R], faire l'expérience [EE], éprouver [EE], faire l'objet de [EE]” (Letters in brackets indicate names of translators: R = Ricoeur; B = Bachelard; EE = Eliane Escoubas). Antonio Ziri6n Quijano, “Glossary-guide for Translating Husserl,” Instituto de Investigaciones Filos6ficas of Universidad Nacional Aut6noma de M6xico, <http://www.filosoficas.unam.mx/~gth/dat-e.htm> (accessed May 16, 2007).

Immanuel Kant). But it also came to mean a more temporally elongated notion of experience based on a learning process, an integration of discrete moments of experience into a narrative whole or an adventure.”³ When we ask whether Husserlian phenomenology perpetuates metaphysics, the preference for *Erlebnis* apparently confirms that this is so: *Erlebnis* is suggestive of the Cartesian subject, present to itself and in possession of its objects. The characterisation of phenomenology as inevitably metaphysical is challenged, however, in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. In a trilogy devoted to the renewal of phenomenology, Marion proposes that phenomenology need depend neither on the constitutive capacities of a subject nor thereby on a constituted object, that some phenomena—those he names “saturated,” or that are otherwise known as paradoxes—exceed the capacities of their witnesses to appropriate them at all, and (in perhaps his most striking claim) that saturated phenomena offer new possibilities for thinking phenomena of revelation.⁴ What is of interest to us here is the way in which, as a result, Marion understands experience in his phenomenological works, and what that will mean for the possibility of an experience of God, phenomenologically understood.

Experience in Marion’s works of phenomenology

On the one hand, it is possible to read Marion and be convinced that he is not at all interested in exploring the idea of experience as such. It is

3. Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 11.

4. The trilogy consists of Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998); *Réduction et donation: recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989); *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); *Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997); *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); *De surcroît: études sur les phénomènes saturés* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001). Apart from the trilogy, relevant major works include *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham, 2002); *Prolégomènes à la charité*, 2nd ed. (Paris: E.L.A. La Différence, 1986); *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); *Le phénomène érotique: Six méditations* (Paris: Grasset, 2003); and *Le visible et le révélé* (Paris: CERF, 2005).

not something he self-consciously addresses until recently, when, in “The Banality of Saturation,” he is driven to declare:

... the description of the saturated phenomenon ... doesn't even speak willingly of experience [*expérience*] (except in the mode of counter-experience [*contre-expérience*]). That is, under the guise of modest showiness, the very notion of experience [*expérience*] already presupposes too much—nothing less than a subject, whose measure and anteriority define from the start the conditions of experience and therefore of objectification.⁵

On the other hand, one could say that all of Marion's phenomenological corpus is concerned with nothing other than experience and its possibility or impossibility. This is because any consideration of the givenness of phenomena presupposes—in a particular sense, and bearing in mind Marion's caution above—the concept of experience. In this study it will not be simply a matter of analysing what Marion says about experience; it will be necessary to show, as well, how aspects of his work imply various understandings of it. Before turning to consider particular examples, a brief sketch of Marion's phenomenological project will help to situate the discussion.

Marion agrees in part with critics of Edmund Husserl, who claim that Husserlian phenomenology is principally concerned with theoretical intentionality, and that the phenomenological reduction is chiefly a reduction to presence and object-ness.⁶ Despite his differences from Immanuel Kant, Husserl depends on the same conditions for the possibility of experience: a horizon and a constituting I.⁷ At the same time, Marion claims that Husserl uncovers the potential for phenomenology to go beyond these limiting conditions. With arguments that the I is actually excluded from the phenomenological reduction, and ultimately fails to constitute itself, Marion maintains that the I is clearly not given according to a horizon of object being but according to the more properly phenomenological horizon of givenness.⁸ The thinking of givenness, as a horizon that imposes no preconditions (or

5. Jean-Luc Marion, “The Banality of Saturation,” *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 383–418; 387; “La banalité de la saturation,” *Le visible et le révélé* (Paris: Cerf, 2005) 143–182, 148.

6. See, for example, Marion, *RG*, 15–19, 154–56, 204; *RD*, 28–33, 230–33; 304.

7. Marion, *BG*, 179–89; *ED*, 251–64.

8. Marion, *RG*, 162–66; *RD*, 240–247; *BG*, 221; *ED*, 309; *RG*, 32ff.; *RD*, 52ff.

as its own horizon), becomes Marion's fundamental task. Of most interest for him is the way in which intuition can potentially give more than any signification can bear; on Marion's understanding, phenomena can be given in a fullness of intuition without being met by a fulfilling concept.⁹ This opens the way for phenomenologists to consider, amongst other things, religious phenomena, and for us to ask what relationship such phenomena might bear to experience.

"The Intentionality of Love" (1983) represents an early articulation of Marion's understanding of the possibility of knowledge of the other person. As the title suggests, here his focus is on intentionality rather than explicitly on an excess of intuition, although he claims to speak of love "freed from intentionality."¹⁰ At the heart of this text is a section on "the crossing of lived experience." Marion describes a situation where the intentional gaze of each lover crosses that of the other, and is felt as a crushing weight, a pressure, an injunction, or a counter-intentionality arising in the lover (that is, the other's gaze is experienced as a pressure arising in me). This results in a common lived experience:

Intentionality and the injunction exchange nothing, especially not two (objectified) lived experiences [*vécus*]; yet they come together in a lived experience [*vécu*] which can only be experienced [*s'éprouver*] in common, since it consists in the balanced resistance of two intentional impulses.¹¹

He goes on to explain this resistance using an analogy from fencing: "Thus, in crossing swords, duelists experience (*éprouvent*) something like a single lived experience (*vécu*) that communicates a common tension . . ." ¹² With the lovers, the one does not see the other as such, but "they see their encounter, for they experience (*éprouvent*) the weight of each impetus one against the other . . ." ¹³

Marion is working within a phenomenological framework, which presumes structures such as intentionality, intuition, and lived experience,

9. *BG*, 17; *ED*, 27.

10. Jean-Luc Marion, "The Intentionality of Love," *Prolegomena to Charity*, 71–101, 100; *Prolégomènes à la charité*, 89–120, 120. See particularly the corresponding note, and the distinction he draws between himself and Emmanuel Lévinas.

11. Marion, "Intentionality," *PC*, 88; *PAC*, 108.

12. Marion, "Intentionality," *PC*, 89; *PAC*, 108–09.

13. Marion, "Intentionality," *PC*, 89; *PAC*, 109.

for example. He is seeking, however, to press that framework to its limits; while using the word “intentionality” he is nevertheless attempting to speak of what he inevitably describes as an experience—without intentionality. What he means by a lived experience that is not intentional (that is, of which we are not conscious, if intentionality means “consciousness of”) is not clear. There are two types of experience to which he refers here. He uses *vécu* with reference to what the lovers experience in common. While we need to bear in mind that *un vécu* is a mental process, Marion is quick to point out that in this instance it is not “objectified,” although it is still “seen.” What the lovers “see” is not each other, but the tension between them, which can only arise because they are two (hence, it is “in common”). It seems possible that Marion is gesturing here towards the enlarged sense of intentionality found in Husserl, as it is described by Emmanuel Lévinas, where it includes what “has a sense” but is not theoretically represented.¹⁴ At the same time, this would contradict his later reference to Lévinas, where Marion claims that “the meaning of the act of love (if it is still a matter of an act) exempts love not only from ‘purely theoretical representation,’ but even more from every intention, because from all intentionality.”¹⁵ We could possibly make a link, however, with other Lévinasian material on “non-intentional consciousness,” which is “an indirect consciousness: immediate, but without an intentional aim; implicit, and purely of accompaniment.”¹⁶ Lévinas maintains that this is “to be distinguished from the inner perception into which it would be apt to be converted. The latter, reflective consciousness . . . [is] forgetful of the indirect *vécu* of the nonintentional and its horizons, forgetful of what accompanies it.”¹⁷ Yet this, too, seems a long way from Marion’s portrayal, where we soon find that the non-objectified lived experience is also described as what the lovers undergo, or suffer. When the text reads: “they

14. Emmanuel Lévinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, 2nd ed., trans. André Orianne (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995) 44.

15. Marion, “Intentionality,” *PC*, 100n15; *PAC*, 120n13.

16. Emmanuel Lévinas, “Nonintentional consciousness,” *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 123–132, 127–28. I am indebted to Kevin Hart for alerting me to this material in Lévinas, in his “Introduction,” *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 1–54, 21.

17. Lévinas, “Nonintentional consciousness,” *Entre Nous*, 128. The translator adds a note to the effect that *vécu* is left untranslated to suggest “lived” rather than “lived experience” (243).

come together in a lived experience [*vécu*] which can only be experienced [*s'éprouver*] in common," we might understand him to be suggesting that while the lived experience is not an object, it can be thought as something that *affects* us in some way.

Reduction and Givenness focuses largely on the work of Husserl, but also has a view to the critiques of Husserlian phenomenology by Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. As such, the majority of references in it to experience are to *Erlebnis*.¹⁸ Here, Marion clearly links Husserl's use of *Erlebnis* with the primacy of presence, and so with the perpetuation of metaphysics. In a lengthy, but significant passage, he observes:

Erlebnis is rightly translated by 'lived experience [*vécu*]' ; one would also have to hear in this lived experience the affective charge that colloquial language retains ('he has lived through a lot'); lived experience implies a test or proof [*épreuve*]; proof in the sense of proof of the actual, encountered world; proof also in the sense of photography or printing: *Erlebnis* signifies, for the mind, undergoing the test of phenomenality; but conversely, proof signifies that the phenomenality of the appearing object is inscribed and attested first in the fabric and according to the flux of consciousness. The appearing object is outlined and adumbrated (*Abschattung, adumbratio*) on the sensible plate of consciousness, which thus becomes the first and unique proof of the phenomenon—undergoing the test of the phenomenon. The regency of the phenomenon by the *Erlebnis* is confirmed—beyond the equivocal splitting of the very notion of the phenomenon—by its hold over the definition of truth: 'Evidence is the "*Erlebnis*" of truth.' Truth, and therefore the completion of phenomenality (full and entire manifestation), opens up against the background of the *Erlebnis*, shows through it as through a filter, is recorded in it as on film, is outlined in it, finally, as in the threads of a preestablished network. The phenomenon appears only in and through the test and the *Erlebnis* of its consciousness—which reigns, unquestioned.

Consciousness thus radically determines phenomenality by imposing upon it the actuality of presence, the absoluteness of intuition, and the test of lived experience [*vécu*].¹⁹

Marion's explication of *Erlebnis* with the use of *épreuve* (translated as "test or proof") is initially suggestive of a wider interpretation of

18. In the index to the English edition (none is provided to concepts in the French), there is no entry for experience or *Erfahrung*, but there are entries for *Erlebnis* and "lived experience." There are, however, occasions when other terms are used: Heidegger's preference is for *Erfahrung*, so some references reflect that use.

19. Marion, *RG*, 54; *RD*, 86–7.

experience, but he re-limits *épreuve* in referring to its photographic sense: “The appearing object is outlined and adumbrated . . . on the sensible plate of consciousness...” While this section of the text contains an implicit critique of Husserl (“The phenomenon appears only in and through the test and the *Erlebnis* of its consciousness—which reigns, unquestioned”); “Consciousness thus . . . determines phenomenality by imposing upon it the actuality of presence . . .”), it is striking in its similarity to a passage from Marion’s later volume, *In Excess*: “Along these lines, I will risk saying that the given, unseen but received, is projected on *l’adonné* (or consciousness, if one prefers) as on a screen . . .”²⁰ It seems that Marion does not ultimately intend to move away from the basic phenomenological structure where experience is understood as the contents of consciousness. However, in light of his overall argument about the exception of the I from being, it would seem odd for him to maintain that those contents are present, or that they imply a metaphysical subject in possession of its objects. And indeed, the clue as to his departure from Husserlian phenomenology in the later passage is the phrase, “unseen but received,” although we have yet to understand what this means.

What is the nature of experience for Marion? Who is the recipient of what? In a later passage from *Reduction and Givenness*, after a detailed examination of Heidegger and the call of being, Marion writes:

No doubt, when I hear *myself* interpellated, I experience *myself* interpellated [*je m’ éprouve interpellé*]; but I do not ever thus acquire the lived experience [*le vécu*] of the (empirical) I or of the (transcendental) I, but only of the (I) *me*, and therefore only and always of a constituted (*me*); I experience *myself* [*je m’ éprouve*] and oppose to the point of divorce the I to the *me*, or else abolish the first in the second, in order to refer it to the claim which, originarily, assigns the I as a *me*. Thus I experience [*je m’ éprouve*]—or: the I is experienced [*je s’ éprouve*]—as claimed, assigned, and convoked in the accusative...²¹

Here we find an early description of Marion’s response to the question, “who comes after the subject?”—a description that he goes on to match with the title, *l’interloqué*, the interlocuted one (later, *l’adonné*, “the gifted,”

20. Marion, *IE*, 50; *DS*, 59.

21. *RG*, 199, *RD*, 298. Emphases in square brackets are from the original, but are reversed in order to allow foreign words to remain largely in italics, that is, words not in italics are being emphasised by Marion.

or “the one handed over”).²² This is not a typically Cartesian or Husserlian I, which constitutes its objects. Trying to get beyond, or, perhaps more accurately, *before*, the transcendental I and the empirical me, Marion speaks of “acquiring” (we might say, being given) the lived experience of “the (I/ *me*, and therefore only and always of a constituted (*me*).” He is trying to sketch the experience of a “subject” that is not in possession of itself, finding itself (given) only in the act of response to a prior convocation. While much later, in “The Banality of Saturation,” we will read that Marion does not ever intend to describe a subject who is totally passive—here the placing of the I in the third person (“the I is experienced”) reinforces the distance between this subject, who is subject to the call, and the active, transcendental subject, who “knows” by way of constitution both its own identity and who or what it is that is calling.²³ In terms of this latter aspect of the experience, it is clear from the material that immediately precedes what is quoted that there is no call object as such, and given the Heideggerian context of the passage, there is no talk of the call as a lived experience, but only of *exposure*.²⁴ The call is only phenomenised in the response of the one to whom it is given: “That which gives itself gives itself only to the one who gives himself over to the call and only in the pure form of a confirmation of the call, which is repeated because received.”²⁵

In *Being Given*, the situation becomes even more complex. Quite early in this text Marion examines the concept of evidence, which for Husserl, traditionally, is “the mental seeing of something itself,” the presence of the thing to consciousness.²⁶ Marion claims to observe a shift in Husserl’s

22. The question comes from Jean-Luc Nancy, *Après le sujet qui vient?* (Paris: Aubier, 1989) but is now in widespread use; Marion himself borrows it in “Banality,” 387.

23. “If boredom liberates the *there* from the call of Being, it sets it free only in order better to expose it to the wind of every other possible call; thus the liberated *there* is exposed to the nonontological possibility of another claim...”; “... the call that demands ‘Listen!’ does not pronounce *one* call among other possibilities to the benefit of a particular authority so much as it performs *the* call as such—the call to render oneself to the call itself, with the sole intention of holding to it by exposing oneself to it.” *RG*, 196, 197; *RD*, 295.

24. “The pure form of the call plays before any specification, even of Being.” Marion, *RG*, 198; *RD*, 297. With regard to exposure, see 196/294.

25. *RG*, 197–98, *RD*, 296.

26. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960) §4, p.10.

understanding of evidence, in the context of a new emphasis on givenness.²⁷ His own perspective on this reads as follows:

For evidence not to close itself up in a simple idol of the gaze and not to remain a dead letter (one that consciousness sends to itself), what is necessary, with an absolute phenomenological necessity, is that evidence give more than a state or lived experience [*vécu*] of consciousness, that it carry in its clarity the appearing of a non-conscious, a non-lived, a non-thought. What is needed is that on its screen there be projected and come forward something other than it—the unevident, the phenomenon itself.²⁸

There are two points of particular interest in this passage. First, the phrase, “what is necessary ... is that evidence give more than a state or lived experience of consciousness,” apparently means that a phenomenon can be given evidentially in excess of a lived experience. This seems to be a move beyond earlier texts. Second, and subsequently, this phenomenon is described as “a non-conscious, a non-lived, a non-thought.” Surely, Marion does not mean that what appears is not “experienced” (although we have not yet ultimately clarified the meaning of that term), since that would close off all discussion. At the same time, if what appears is non-conscious, non-lived, and non-thought, not only is it not constituted by a subject, but it enters into experience as excess—in Marion’s terms, this is likely to mean in excess of objectivity or being. Marion’s discussion of the work of art is helpful on this point, where that excess is described as an event, or as the “effect” of the painting:

... whether painting or object (in the sense of a phenomenon of the world in general), appearing always has the rank and function not of a representation submitted to the imperial initiative of the gaze of consciousness, but of an event whose happening stems ... from an upsurging, a coming-up, an arising—in short, an effect. “Effect” obviously must be understood here with all its polysemy: effect as the shock that the visible provokes, effect as the emotion that invades the one gazing ... This complexity of mingled effects attests that a meaning ... imposes itself ...²⁹

27. “At issue here is the passage from lived experience and appearing to objectness, for the sake of finally attesting givenness.” Marion, *BG*, 30; *ED*, 46.

28. Marion, *BG*, 20; *ED*, 32.

29. Marion, *BG*, 49; *ED*, 73–74. I am grateful to Joeri Schrijvers for his discussion of this point in *Ontotheological Turnings? The Decentering of the Modern Subject in Recent French Phenomenology* (PhD Diss. Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2006) 59ff.

The painting has an effect that Marion claims is not a perception, and not an emotion, but a passion. “The effect makes the soul vibrate with vibrations that evidently represent neither an object nor a being and which cannot themselves be described or represented in the modes of objects or beings.”³⁰ Marion’s ensuing discussion of the possibility of givennesses without a given is also helpful in considering the possibility of experiencing the non-thought. “We could experience [*éprouver*], say, or think nothing of them [that is, of “every negation and every denegation, every negative, every nothing and every logical contradiction”] if we did not first experience them [*les éprouvions*] as givennesses possibly without given, therefore as givennesses all the more pure.”³¹

Marion maintains that some of the objections to his work have a basis solely in a suspicion that what he does is theological, rather than phenomenological. But he also draws out those objections in terms related to experience:

... givenness would belong within empty schema because there would be only a very ‘watered down experience [*expérience*] of it,’ one which would be ‘attenuated, to the point of annihilating itself,’ to the point where it becomes a “phenomenology more and more negative.”³²

Once liberated from its transcendent conditions, is givenness still identifiable; doesn’t it vanish in a cloud of smoke, the last breath of a fading concept, of an excessive paradox, of an all too pure experience? [*d’une expérience trop pure*]³³

Givenness would either give no experience or an experience that was inaccessible (“too pure”). In the context of *Being Given*, he responds to these objections by describing lived experiences related to the gift (since “the fold of givenness . . . is unfolded in the given”), where he is most concerned to demonstrate their immanence, and their lack of implication in schemes of causality and exchange.³⁴ In my judgment, however, this

30. Marion, *BG*, 50, 51; *ED*, 75.

31. Marion, *BG*, 55; *ED*, 81–82.

32. Marion, *BG*, 72; *ED*, 104. He cites Dominique Janicaud in *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Paris: Éditions de l’Éclat, 1991) as the source of the criticism.

33. Marion, *BG*, 84; *ED*, 123.

34. Marion, *BG*, 70, 74; *ED*, 102, 108.

does not ultimately preclude the appearance of the gift in presence.³⁵ While Marion includes a hermeneutic element in his analysis of the gift (the decision by the giver or the givee to view it as such), as well as an element of differential delay, he does not describe the gift with the excessive quality he later confers on phenomena of saturation.³⁶ These he considers later in the book. Nevertheless, his progressive understanding of lived experience is instructive. The constituted I is not the originator of lived experiences, but the recipient of them, and a cooperator in bringing them to phenomenality: “. . . it receives (undergoes) [*éprouve*] the given lived experiences of consciousness [*les vécus de conscience donnés*] and constitutes them as full phenomena . . . ”³⁷ Further, lived experience is at once indubitable (“All that consciousness undergoes and lives remains immanent to it; therefore, every lived experience is identified with consciousness and becomes as indubitable to it as it is to itself”) and yet potentially delivers more than

35. For a fuller discussion of this point, see my *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) 126–37, and “Aporia or Excess? Two Strategies for Thinking R/revelation,” *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Kevin Hart and Yvonne Sherwood (London: Routledge, 2004) 325–336.

36. Marion, *BG*, 106ff., 99; *ED*, 152ff. The point is made on 111/159, where by way of an objection, Marion notes that acceptability might be understood as a lived experience with no phenomenal content: “. . . givability is a lived experience referred to a phenomenon, while acceptability consists, at best, in a decision of the will, without phenomenal content.” He contests this view, maintaining that “acceptability depends, as with givability, on a decision—that of receiving or giving the gift. To decide on this double decision certainly falls to the givee and the giver, but always starting from the reduced phenomenon, to the extent that the gift gives *itself* of itself under the aspect of the lived experiences of givability and acceptability.” While Marion wants to refer the lived experience to the reduced phenomenon, it is nevertheless interesting to conceive of the possibility of a lived experience without phenomenal content, or at least, where the phenomenal content is aporetic. This is what, in the end, I would argue that Marion’s counter-experience involves. One thinks immediately of Derrida’s analysis of the experience of the decision: “There must be decision, there must be absolute risk and thus there must be the undecidable. . . If there are no undecidables, there is no decision. There is simply programming, calculation. There must be political, ethical decisions, but these decisions are possible only in situations where the undecidable is a necessary dilemma [*épreuve*], the law. Without this dilemma, one is content to apply a program, to deploy a causality. But at the moment of the undecidable, decision is not possible, either.” Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971–2001*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 31.

37. Marion, *BG*, 116; *ED*, 165, trans. modified.

object presence (“It must be emphasized that doubt does not bear on the given insofar as it arrives in experience [*l’expérience*]; nothing contests this fact. But this fact is overshadowed by another instance: . . . ‘the possibility of the non-being of the experienced [*l’expérimenté*], despite and during the experience [*l’expérience*] itself.’ ”)³⁸ It seems that where lived experience does not deliver (present) objects, we are still able to speak of experience; the experienced might not *be*, but it still enters experience. Finally, “intentional lived experiences [*vécus*] [are] often experienced through [*pris à*] counter-intentionality.”³⁹ Not only do lived experiences arrive from elsewhere, but this elsewhere is experienced as a pressure or force working over and against the intentional gaze of the I.⁴⁰

When Marion moves into Book IV of *Being Given*, where he considers degrees of givenness, he simultaneously moves, by and large, from a Husserlian vocabulary to a Kantian one. *Vécu* is replaced with *expérience*, or at least, *expérience*—whatever that means—emerges as the predominant word for experience. His first task is to establish that Kant’s conditions for the possibility of experience do not determine whether a phenomenon might give itself. Using Kant’s definition of possibility, Marion notes of experience that it “has the form of a phenomenality, that experience [*l’expérience*] has a form (‘formal conditions’) precisely because it experiences [*expérimente*] sensible forms of apparition.”⁴¹ What Marion argues is that the finitude of experience thus understood leads to the inability to conceive of phenomena that might give themselves in a surplus of intuition—a possibility, indeed, already foreshadowed by Kant in his thought of the sublime.⁴² But is Marion thus also arguing for a broader definition of experience? On the one hand,

38. Marion, *BG*, 125, 137; *ED*, 179, 194. Marion quotes from Edmund Husserl, *Erste Philosophie*, II, §33, Hua. VIII (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959) 50. On this possibility, see also §34, p. 53.

39. Marion, *BG*, 175; *ED*, 246.

40. For an interesting reading of Marion’s reversal of the subject-object priority, see Schrijvers, *Ontotheological Turnings?*

41. Marion, *BG*, 181; *ED*, 253. “What then does experience [*l’expérience*] experience [*expérimente*]? Obviously objects having the status of phenomena and whose entire experience [*l’expérience*] consists in their appearing. As a result, the condition which offers a reason for possibility also offers a reason for the appearing of phenomena. They therefore appear only on condition—on condition of the conditions of experience [*l’expérience*].” Marion, *BG*, 183; *ED*, 256.

42. Marion, *BG*, 197; *ED*, 276–77.

yes, because as his sketch of the saturated phenomenon unfolds according to the Kantian categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality, he continues to refer to experience. For example, in speaking of what the gaze cannot bear, he notes: “for not bearing is not simply equivalent to not seeing: one must first perceive, if not clearly see, in order to undergo [*éprouver*] what one cannot bear,” or further, “thus, the eye experiences [*éprouve*] only its powerlessness to see anything, except the bursting that submerges it...”⁴³ Experience in the sense it appears here is clearly suffering, enduring, or undergoing. What is given is “experienced” only in its excessiveness, to the extent that it affects the one receiving it rather than appearing as an object. On the other hand, Marion very firmly states: “the saturated phenomenon contradicts the subjective conditions of experience [*l'expérience*] precisely in that it does not admit constitution as an object.”⁴⁴

This tension between experience and its impossibility is brought to a head when, in an important passage, Marion describes what he calls the “counter-experience”:

If it appears counter to the conditions for the possibility of experience [*expérience*], how could the supposed excellence of its phenomenality not end up as a pure and simple impossibility of experience—not even an experience of the impossible? The response to this difficulty resides in its very statement: if, for the saturated phenomenon, there is no experience of an object, it remains for us to imagine that there might be a counter-experience [*contre-expérience*] of a non-object. Counter-experience is not equivalent to a nonexperience [*non-expérience*], but to the experience of a phenomenon that is neither regardable, nor guarded according to objectness, one that therefore resists the conditions of objectification. Counter-experience offers the experience of what irreducibly contradicts the conditions for the experience of objects. Such experience to the second degree recovers the peculiarly Husserlian novelty of founded acts: like them, in order to appear, it depends on the very thing that it passes beyond but nevertheless renders intelligible. We could therefore say that, of the saturated phenomenon, there is founded experience [*il y a expérience fondée*]. That is, confronted with the saturated phenomenon, the I cannot not see it, but it cannot any longer gaze at it as its mere object. . . It sees the superabundance of intuitive givenness; or

43. Marion, *BG*, 203, 205; *ED*, 285, 288. See also *BG*, 216–17; *ED*, 301–302.

44. Marion, *BG*, 214; *ED*, 299. Hart writes: “[The saturated phenomenon] does not appear as an object and so cannot be experienced. Nor does it give itself simply as non-experience. Rather, it ‘offers the experience of what irreducibly contradicts the conditions for the experience of objects.’” Kevin Hart, “Introduction,” *CE*, 38.

rather, it does not see it clearly and precisely as such since its excess renders it irregardable and difficult to master.⁴⁵

Why does experience not become impossible in the face of the saturated phenomenon? Because experience becomes counter-experience, which is a particular type of experience, determined by its content (non-object, superabundant in intuitive givenness, dazzling). Counter-experience is “experience to the second degree” because it is “founded,” that is, “it depends on the very thing that it passes beyond but nevertheless renders intelligible.”⁴⁶ Marion does not try to determine the experience of the saturated phenomenon as “an experience of the impossible,” instead focusing his initial question on the apparent impossibility of experience to which the saturated phenomenon might lead. In effect, however, by defining the counter-experience in terms of its content, he has reached the same conclusion, at least if we read “the impossible” with a Derridean inflection (and with not just a little of John D. Caputo’s gloss), as not the impossible as such but as the aporetic.⁴⁷ A counter-experience is an experience of what cannot be experienced as an object (“Counter-experience offers the experience of what irreducibly contradicts the conditions for the experience of objects.”) In this light we can understand Marion’s further comment that “The I can no longer provide its meaning to lived experiences [*vécus*] and

45. Marion, *BG*, 215; *ED*, 300–301. All mentions of experience here are translations of *expérience*.

46. “...founded acts Husserl calls ‘non-objectifying acts’; they are the qualities of wish, will, love, hate, etc., that can only make their appearance in combination with an underlying objectifying act.” Quentin Smith, “On Husserl’s Theory of Consciousness in the Fifth Logical Investigation,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXXVII (June, 1977), http://www.qsmithwu.com/on_husserl's_theory_of_consciousness_in_the_fifth_logical_investigation.htm (accessed June 13, 2007).

47. On Derrida and the impossible, see, for example, *Given Time 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 35. See also Caputo’s gloss in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997) 20ff. Caputo’s link between experience and the impossible is telling for our purposes: “The impossible ... is what makes experience to be *expérience*, makes it truly worthy of the name ‘experience,’ an occasion in which something really ‘happens’...” *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001) 11. Although rarely, Marion, too, uses the term “aporetic,” for example *BG*, 111; *ED*, 159.

intuition; rather, these give themselves and therefore give it their meaning (a meaning that is for that matter partial and no longer all encompassing).⁴⁸

In turning to *In Excess*, there is little to add to what has already been said of *Being Given*. That is not to say that Marion's comments there about experience are unimportant, but that he has already sketched for us the basis of his understanding of experience. We are still set within the framework of phenomenology, such that it includes lived experiences (and his discussion of lived experience is extensive), but it is clear that lived experience is to be understood as what affects us, and not necessarily as what is represented:

“Consider the given obtained by the reduction; it can be described as what Husserl named the lived experience [*vécu*] or *Erlebnis*. The lived experience does not show itself as such but remains invisible by default (a capital point that is often misunderstood). It will be said, for the lack of a better expression, that it affects me, imposes itself on me and weighs on what one dares name my consciousness (precisely because it does not yet have the clear and evident consciousness of anything when it receives the pure given). The given, as a lived experience [*vécu*], remains a *stimulus*, an excitation, scarcely a piece of information; *l'adonné* receives it, without its showing itself in any case.”⁴⁹

In a later passage, Marion points to the abundance of lived experiences and the subsequent inability of the I to constitute these effectively as characteristic of the saturated phenomenon.⁵⁰

While there are other texts we could consider (such as *The Erotic Phenomenon* and its consideration of the experience of taking flesh), we turn finally instead to the place where Marion's reflections on experience have been most explicit, and self-consciously so: “The Banality of Saturation.”

48. Marion, *BG*, 217; *ED*, 302. Trans. modified.

49. Marion, *IE*, 49; *DS*, 58–59.

50. “Well, *finvu* results from the fact that the intentionality of the object cannot (and, without doubt, must not) give meaning to all the lived experiences and all the sketches nevertheless given to it. The object constrains constitution from discerning, choosing and excluding a considerable part of the intuition that concerns it. In effect, poverty in intuition, far from making the constitution of the object fragile, assures it, to the contrary, of certitude and permanence. The less the object calls for lived experiences, the more easily its intention can find its confirmation, and the more continuously it can repeat its aim in an object that from that point is quasi-subsistent.” — “In effect, before the event, I cannot assign a single meaning to the immensity of lived experiences that happen to me.” Marion, *IE*, 111, 112; *DS*, 133–34, 135.

Here Marion sums up the primary thesis of his work as a consideration of “the situation in which intuition would not only validate all that to which the concept assures intelligibility, but would also add a given (sensations, experiences [*expériences*], information, it matters little) that this concept would no longer be able to constitute as an object or render objectively intelligible.”⁵¹ The list of givens that need not be objects is fascinating in itself (for example, it includes “information,” where that was previously explicitly excluded), but that it lists experiences rather than lived experiences is already suggestive.⁵² Marion proceeds once again by examining objections that have been made to his work, the first of which concerns experience, and he claims that the saturated phenomenon goes beyond the (phenomenological) possibility of experience while being situated within experience, that it is an attempt to describe a “‘pure experience’ ” of “‘full transcendence [and] its pure alterity’,” and that experience without a subject is, in any case, not possible.⁵³

In response, Marion questions a univocal understanding of experience, that is, one that is based on objectivity.⁵⁴ The saturated phenomenon, he maintains, is not about “the non-experience of objects (contradicting all the conditions for the possibility of experience),” but about a “verifiable experience of a non-objective phenomenon” (that contradicts the possibility of *objects* of experience “because it would arise with a non-objective experience.”) Another way of speaking about “non-objective experience” is as “the experience of what, contradicting the conditions of experience, appears in the mode of their saturation in a counter-experience.”⁵⁵ Further, Marion questions whether it is possible to speak of experience “in general”: “... if experience in general is identified with certain conditions, of what experience is one speaking and is *this* concept of experience self-evident?”⁵⁶ He maintains that it is time to critique the concept of experience, that is, the concept of experience that presupposes not only an object but also a

51. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 384; *VR*, 145.

52. And in the passages we will consider, we are dealing solely with *expérience* and *contre-expérience*.

53. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 386–87; *VR*, 147–49.

54. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 386; *VR*, 148.

55. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 398; *VR*, 166. My emphasis.

56. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 399; *VR*, 167.

subject.⁵⁷ Marion claims that experience “does not always aim at an object nor is it always determined by a subject; it can also expose an ‘I’ that is non-transcendental (and non-empirical), but given over, to [*adonné à*] a non-constitutable because saturated phenomenon.”⁵⁸

Experience, then, is again to be understood as counter-experience, or perhaps it is clearer to use Marion’s expression, that by way of the saturated phenomenon we “experience ... the counter-experience itself.”⁵⁹ If we specify that even further, it is not the experience of any thing, but is “a contrary experience or rather one that always counteracts”; “it is confined to counteracting the counteracting of intuition by the concept.”⁶⁰ There are three characteristics of counter-experience: that there is no longer any concept at which intentionality can aim; that all concepts are saturated by intuition; and most importantly for our purposes, that counter-experience unsettles, perturbs, or agitates the witness whom it afflicts.⁶¹ The counter-experience affects me, and has the potential to change me.⁶²

We have, then, finally reached a point where we might summarise Marion’s understanding of experience. While in much of his work he maintains the phenomenological structure of the *vécu*, this becomes increasingly empty as his work progresses, to the point where the *expérience* that is given to the witness (*adonné/interloqué*) in the saturated phenomenon can have no ultimate theoretical determination and is evidenced only by the way it disturbs its recipient. *Experience in this sense is not something that*

57. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 399; *VR*, 167–68.

58. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 400; *VR*, 169. Marion earlier argues that the belief that experience cannot be thought without a subject in fact “rests on the univocity of the concept of subject.” 384/149.

59. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 401; *VR*, 171.

60. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 400; *VR*, 169. While Schrijvers rightly objects that Marion places in opposition the choice of describing the phenomenon as an object or as a saturated phenomenon (*Ontotheological Turnings?*, 107ff.), it seems to me clear from Marion’s material on banality that he envisions phenomena which could rightly be described in both ways: “... the majority of phenomena that appear at first glance as poor in intuition could be described not only as objects, but also as phenomena that intuition saturates and therefore exceeds all univocal concept. Before the majority of phenomena ... there opens the possibility of a double interpretation, which depends only on the demands of my ever changing relation to them” (391/155–56).

61. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 402–404; *VR*, 172–75.

62. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 404–405; *VR*, 175–76.

*belongs to me within my sphere of thought and action, but something that happens to me, and of which I cannot take full account.*⁶³

Now, if we return to the objections that Marion lists at the start of “The Banality of Saturation,” it will be evident that there is one that has not been addressed, that is, the one maintaining that the saturated phenomenon is an attempt to describe a “‘pure experience’” of “‘full transcendence [and] its pure alterity’.” Marion’s response is that the saturated phenomenon is not concerned with “the fiction of a ‘pure experience’” (“whose absurdity,” he claims in dismissing it, “is easy to show”) and the subject on whose capacities it would be founded.⁶⁴ Presumably, an experience of full or pure transcendence would be an oxymoron, and yet Marion’s attempts to speak of revelation imply the possibility of the entry of absolute alterity into experience. It is to this possibility that we now turn.

An experience of God?

While it is important not to appear to limit the scope of Marion’s consideration of alterity to the otherness of God, which would thereby perpetuate a stereotype or caricature that he is anxious to overcome, it is nevertheless true that his concerns are often theological, and that his recent work on the possibility of revelation (and Revelation) genuinely invites reflection on how he thinks God. It is not the purpose of the present work to re-rehearse

63. Compare this with Hart’s description, set in the context of a summary of experience according to many of our protagonists: “Like others before him, Marion offers himself as a philosopher of experience. For Kant, experience takes place in space and time through synthetic *a priori* concepts... Husserl figures experience as ‘the relevant acts of perceiving, judging etc., with their variable sense-material, their interpretative content, their assertive characters etc.’ and concludes that ‘what the ego or consciousness experiences, are its experience.’ In his turn, Henry construes experience as pure auto-affection, while for Derrida it is ‘traversal, voyage, ordeal, both *mediatized* (culture, reading, interpretation, work, generalities, rules, and concepts) and *singular*. Certainly Marion discusses lived experience, especially that of the other person. More importantly, though, he attends closely to what cuts across all experience and cannot be folded back into it.” Kevin Hart, “Introduction,” *CE*, 37–38. The quote from Husserl is from *Logical Investigations* 2:540. Hart’s comparison of Marion with Maurice Blanchot is illuminating: “‘[The Outside] is not a lived event, and ... does not engage the present of presence.’ It is ‘already nonexperience...’ We must talk, then, of an ‘excess of experience’ in which ‘no experience occurs.’”

64. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 386–87; *VR*, 147–48.

arguments about the success or otherwise of the saturated phenomenon as such, except to say that the inevitably hermeneutic dimension of phenomenology can be seen to be critical to it.⁶⁵ This is highly relevant to the question of the possibility of an experience of “‘full transcendence [and] its pure alterity’.”

To what extent can one say that one has experienced God? I am not sure that Marion ever speaks about “experiencing God” in exactly those terms, and he does not directly address the question of full transcendence in “The Banality of Saturation” other than to dismiss it as “a pure and simple fiction.”⁶⁶ He does, however, talk of phenomena of revelation, and we can infer from previous discussion that these phenomena thereby enter the realm of experience.⁶⁷ When Marion addresses revelation from the perspective of phenomenology, he is careful to point out that he is addressing its phenomenological possibility rather than its theological actuality.⁶⁸ But as I have argued elsewhere, to identify a phenomenon of revelation inevitably demands a commitment in advance to its Revelatory force.⁶⁹ There is an ambiguity in Marion’s work when he considers revelation: while he redefines it phenomenologically in *In Excess*, so that “the revealed does not thus define an extreme stratum or a particular region of phenomenality, but rather the universal mode of phenomenalization of what gives *itself* in what shows *itself*,” it is clear from his examples that Christian Revelation is often intended.⁷⁰ And if we take a theological definition of revelation—that it is not only the unveiling, disclosure, or communication, by a divine power,

65. See my *Rethinking God as Gift*; “Aporia or Excess?” and *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005). For recent critical developments, see the excellent studies by Shane Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess: The Implicit Hermeneutics of Jean-Luc Marion’s Saturated Phenomena* (PhD Diss. Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2004), and Schrijvers, *Ontotheological Turnings?*

66. Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 386; *VR*, 148.

67. In a way that is helpful for our discussion, Marion considers the problem of revelation in relation to lived experience (*Erlebnis*) in “Le possible et la revelation,” *VR*, 13–34, 14, 23–25.

68. Marion, *BG*, 242, 367n90, 297; *ED*, 337, 329n90, 410.

69. Horner, “Aporia or Excess?” 330.

70. Marion, *IE* 52, *DS*, 62. The redefinition of revelation can, in fact, already be seen in an earlier work. See Jean-Luc Marion, “Le phénomène saturé,” *Phénoménologie et théologie*, ed. Jean-François Courtine (Paris: Critérim, 1992) 79–128; “The Saturated Phenomenon,” trans. Thomas A. Carlson, *Philosophy Today* 40.1–4 (1996): 103–124. Here Marion defines revelation phenomenologically as « ... une apparition purement de soi et à partir de soi... », 127/121.

of something previously hidden, but that it is God's self-revelation (so that what is revealed is not primarily truths *about* God but God in Godself)—then to experience a phenomenon of revelation would also somehow be to experience God.⁷¹

As we have already seen, the experience (or, more properly, counter-experience) of the saturated phenomenon is such that there is no concept at which intentionality can aim; all concepts are saturated by intuition; and it unsettles, perturbs, or agitates the witness whom it afflicts. A saturated phenomenon would therefore be hard pressed to reveal anything specific, not, at least, without admitting the need for some kind of interpretation (and this interpretative function invariably “upgrades” the role of the I in a way that is not inconsistent with what Marion says about its cooperative function in bringing the given to visibility).⁷² The saturated phenomenon has to be seen *as* something, and yet it defies the capacity of the one to whom it gives itself precisely to see it—in its saturation—as any *thing*. How, then, would we know an experience of God when we saw one (or didn't see it, exactly)? How would we know—to take up the point of Jocelyn Benoit, a further criticism addressed by Marion in “Banality”—that we were not deluding ourselves?⁷³ And how would an experience of God so recognised not compromise God's transcendence to the extent that it would become yet another instance of having met the Buddha on the road (and so having to kill him)?

Since we are limiting ourselves to Marion's phenomenology, rather than his theology *per se*, we will take an example from Marion's

71. See, for example, Gerald O'Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Paulist, 2000) 221. A Catholic understanding of revelation includes that along with God in Godself are revealed truths that could not have been known by humanity apart from revelation. See Gerald O'Collins and Mario Farrugia, *Catholicism: The Story of Catholic Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 97.

72. Marion, *IE*, 50–52; *DS*, 59–62.

73. Marion's response here is to suggest that while “it is not enough to claim to see in order to prove that one saw ... the fact or the pretense not to see does not prove that there is nothing to see.” Marion, “Banality,” *CE*, 388; *VR*, 152. Schrijvers comments—and here he also draws on the work of others—on the way in which Marion is apparently unable to avoid the situation where “seeing” what more there is to see is a matter of personal merit. *Ontotheological Turnings?* 102ff. See also Thomas A. Carlson, “Blindness and the Decision to See,” *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 153–79.

phenomenological corpus. The subject matter of chapter six of *In Excess* is prayer and praise. In response to Derrida's argument that negative theology is a covert affirmative theology, and that prayer and praise are attempts to re-present God, Marion puts forward mystical theology ("the third way") as the more inherently theological stance.⁷⁴ Prayer and praise do not seek to present or to re-present. In the final part of the chapter, Marion nevertheless asks: "if that with which the third way of mystical theology deals in fact is revealed, how should the phenomenon be described, such that we do justice to its possibility?"⁷⁵ He responds with a classic definition of the saturated phenomenon. Mystical theology, he maintains, is where "the impossibility of attaining knowledge of an object, comprehension in the strict sense, does not come from a deficiency in the giving intuition, but from its *excess*, which neither concept nor signification nor intention can foresee, organize, or contain."⁷⁶ Marion then notes the objection that it is not possible to consider God's self-giving in saturating intuition, since "the evidence attests that precisely and *par excellence* God is never given intuitively."⁷⁷ Now, he argues that in terms of phenomenology, he is not required to answer this objection, since phenomenology concerns the possibility rather than the actuality of revelation. And yet it seems to me that the phenomenological claim that revelation enters experience as a saturated phenomenon demands a description of this experience, even without a commitment to its theological meaning. And Marion actually proceeds hypothetically with such a description, claiming that the figure of the paradox would be particularly apt in the case of any potentially divine phenomenality.⁷⁸ He maintains that even if this intuition had no positive form, it would be known in the effects God's self-giving had on the recipient, the first of which would be stupor, or terror:

74. Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) 73–142; "Comment ne pas parler. Dénégations," *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).

75. Marion, *IE*, 158; *DS*, 191.

76. Marion, *IE*, 159; *DS*, 192. Trans. modified.

77. Marion, *IE*, 161; *DS*, 193.

78. Marion, *IE*, 161; *DS*, 194.

Access to the divine phenomenality is not forbidden to us; in contrast, it is precisely when we become entirely open to it that we find ourselves forbidden from it—frozen, submerged, we are by ourselves forbidden from advancing and likewise from resting. In the mode of interdiction, terror attests the insistent and unbearable excess of the intuition of God.⁷⁹

The second effect is described as the inability to stop talking about the intuition, either in the sense of trying to elucidate what has happened (“evoking, discussing”), or in the negative sense of “denying that of which we all admit to having no concept.”⁸⁰

While Marion’s account of God’s self-giving in prayer is theologically very coherent, and while it seems to address concerns about the metaphysical nature of theology, we are left with some lingering questions about the phenomenological description of the experience. One could perhaps hear Benoist asking whether or not the effects of terror and talk might not be explained in some other way. He might suggest that of themselves, these effects do not prove that the experience was one of God. And Marion might agree. In his conclusion, he claims that the Name (of God) functions as a call. It was noted earlier that a call is only phenomenally in the response of the one who is called, but here we find the additional stipulation that our calling of the Name can never be predicative, but always misses the mark. While Marion does not say it explicitly here, it therefore always carries an element of risk, for I never know for sure whether or not the one I so name is God. Elsewhere, he seems to confirm that the precise origin of the call is always undecidable.⁸¹

To remain faithful to Marion’s notion of the excessiveness of the saturated phenomenon, but equally, to claim that it can have any meaning at all—especially a revelatory one—it is necessary to go beyond the letter (if arguably not the spirit) of Marion’s text and to refine even further the relationship of the saturated phenomenon to experience. We can do this by way of the horizon. While Marion’s explication of this area is ambiguous, we could argue that the horizon is effectively interrupted by the saturated

79. Marion, *IE*, 161–62; *DS*, 194. We cannot but be reminded of Derrida’s description in *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 53–56.

80. Marion, *IE*, 162; *DS*, 194–95.

81. See my discussion of this point in *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction*, 131.

phenomenon.⁸² To express this otherwise, counter-experience acts to interrupt the normal unfolding of experience. Its resistance to representation is thereby contextualised by what it interrupts. To my mind, this constitutes part of the necessary hermeneutic dimension of the reception of the saturated phenomenon: not only that it might be “founded” on an object that can be read this way or that, either as object or as saturated phenomenon (depending on my capacity to “see,” or, perhaps better, on the effects it has in me), but that it interrupts a context and can only be interpreted by way of that context. Both these “readings” of the saturated phenomenon involve the risk of possible delusion, which precludes us from ascribing any absolute meaning to the saturated phenomenon, but at least they enable us to move further with the possibility of revelation.⁸³ In terms of experience, then, admitting the importance of context means allowing for what the recipient brings to the experience as well as what he or she will take from it. To the understanding of this type of experience as something that happens to me, and of which I cannot take full account, we would be adding the notion that the meaning ultimately ascribed to it (not in the sense that any concept would exhaust it, but in the general sense that one might say it was “of God”) will emerge as part of a learning process. We will have moved, in other words, to an understanding of experience as *Erfahrung* in its fullest sense. The work of two commentators supports and amplifies this idea.

In the first place, Kevin Hart’s work on the experience of God is salient. He notes: “The experience of God, if the expression can be trusted, does not turn on yielding positive knowledge of God. The event is *lived*...” What he means here by “lived” is not that the event is a lived experience, but precisely that it is not an “item” of experience. He goes on to suggest that experience of God is so lived in three ways: that it is “passed through, enjoyed, or suffered”; that while it is an “encounter” (which we might take to mean that it exceeds our conceptual capacities), it is still interpreted contextually (“[the Christian] has usually anticipated it in Christian categories and in all likelihood will continue to interpret it in the same way”); and that it reorients

82. See Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction*, 113–14; Kevin Hart, “Introduction,” *Counter-experiences*, 13–14.

83. This risks, of course, that we will be “stuck with subjective impressions of some kind.” Schrijvers, *Ontotheological Turnings?*, 108.

the experience of the believer.⁸⁴ While Hart uses experience in the sense of “passed through, enjoyed, or suffered,” an interpretation we might presume favours *Erfahrung* over *Erlebnis*, he soon points out that “it does not follow that the divine must present itself as an item of experience, whether that be *Erlebnis* or *Erfahrung*.”⁸⁵ Hart also writes that if we retain the “ordinary sense” of experience “we can talk of experience *with* God but not, strictly speaking, *of* God.”⁸⁶ Yet we can give experience an extraordinary sense, and here he refers us to the essay by Caputo in the same volume, where experience is defined as “the impossible,” and where “God” is understood as “the possibility of the impossible.”⁸⁷ For our purposes, Hart’s analysis is useful in that it underscores the way in which the believer comes to the experience but is also reoriented by it. It is consistent with Marion’s account of saturation, where God does not become an “item” of experience, but instead affects us while exceeding our capacity to re-present. This is reinforced by Hart’s adoption of “counter-experience” in lieu of “experience of God.” Finally, it emphasises the necessary dimension of faith:

In prayer we encounter God as absolute subject, and never as intentional object. That is, God is disclosed only in the dimension of faith. . . In prayer there passes through our lives a disturbance that we do not inaugurate and that we cannot control, either intellectually or affectively. Counter-experience unsettles us, invites us to stand only in the ground and abyss of faith and there to see our experiences from the perspective of divine love.⁸⁸

This connects with an important aspect of the work of our second commentator, Shane Mackinlay, who examines some of Marion’s recent thinking on the saturated phenomenon in relation to theology. Marion’s account of the Emmaus story can be understood as an attempt to describe a paradigm of saturation.⁸⁹ In what passes for an inevitably hermeneutic

84. Kevin Hart, “Introduction,” *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*, ed. Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 1–19, 9.

85. Hart, “Introduction,” *EG*, 14.

86. Hart, “Introduction,” *EG*, 19.

87. John D. Caputo, “The Experience of God and the Axiology of the Impossible,” *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*, ed. Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 20–46, 24.

88. Hart, “Introduction,” *EG*, 14.

89. Jean-Luc Marion, “They Recognized Him; and He Became Invisible to Them,” trans. Stephen E. Lewis, *Modern Theology* 18.2 (2002): 145–52; “Ils le reconnurent et lui-même leur

supplement to his phenomenology, Marion maintains that faith is required for the disciples to see God's presence in Jesus (as saturated phenomenon). Nevertheless:

The account of faith Marion develops in his essay on the journey to Emmaus is strongly shaped by his contention that revelation is a saturated phenomenon (which exceeds our capacity to understand). . . . However, because he only draws on the derivative sense of faith as a conceptual understanding, Marion is forced to describe the disciples as *fully grasping* Jesus' revelation in the breaking of the bread—that is, he is forced to describe Jesus' revelation as precisely *not* being saturated.⁹⁰

Mackinlay suggests that faith does, indeed, operate as a hermeneutic supplement to phenomena of revelation, but that it does so by providing the context (or “hermeneutic space”) in which revelation can be recognised *as* revelation.⁹¹

To argue for the hermeneutic role of faith is not simply to agree with Benoist that the difference between seeing and not seeing comes down to believing, or even with Marion that not seeing ultimately depends on a kind of moral deficiency: the relation between seeing and not seeing is more complex and subtle than that.⁹² Instead, it is to suggest that one's capacity to be affected by anything—but let us say particularly by a saturated phenomenon—will depend to a large degree on whether or not there is a context to interrupt. This solution will not answer Marion's critics by offering proof of saturated phenomena, and especially not proof that phenomena of revelation are possible. But it does build on the instance of where two or more people, quite reasonably, read the same phenomena entirely differently. To give a theological example, from the portraits presented in the Gospels it is clear that people encounter the person of Jesus in many different ways. For some, he is no more than a criminal or a preacher or a wonder-worker. For

devint invisible,” *Demain l'église*, ed. Jean Duchesne and Jacques Ollier (Paris: Flammarion, 2001) 134–43; Shane Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess*; “Eyes Wide Shut: A Response to Jean-Luc Marion's Account of the Journey to Emmaus,” *Modern Theology* 20.3 (2004): 447–56.

90. Mackinlay, “Eyes Wide Shut,” 453.

91. Mackinlay, “Eyes Wide Shut,” 454, but see the discussion in chapter 8 of *Interpreting Excess*.

92. See Jocelyn Benoist, “Le tournant théologique,” *L'idée de la phénoménologie* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2001).

others, he *affects* them to the extent that they come to believe he is divine. The latter interpretation does not come from no-where: while it is aberrant within Judaism it can also only emerge as it does in the context of that faith. But it takes time, reflection, and further experience to develop. We could argue that in this sense Jesus is a paradigm of the saturated phenomenon, not because he enters experience unmistakably as God, but because, in fact, he does not, and we are left still wondering.