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The Gift of Prayer: Toward a Theological Reading of Jean-Luc Marion

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This article proposes a theological interpretation of Jean-Luc Marion that accents the importance of prayer as a remedy to conceptual idolatry. It also addresses theological concerns about Marion's understanding of the relationship between phenomenology and theology, and about his critical attitude toward ontology. In response to the first concern, it uses Marion's readings of Dionysius the Areopagite and Augustine to demonstrate that Marion prioritizes a prayerful approach to theology that transcends phenomenology, even while benefiting from it. In response to the second concern, it draws on Marion's treatments of Dionysius, Augustine, and Aquinas to show how the same prayerful theology accommodates an ontological way of praising God. Prayer is the key to both arguments. Prayer resists the conceptual idolatries operative in the realms of phenomenality and of being, while revealing the potential iconicity of both. Finally, this article clarifies why Marion's recent Augustine book is crucial to an understanding of his project.

Keywords: phenomenology, Dionysius, Augustine, Aquinas, Heidegger, Marion

My aim here is to articulate an insight that Jean-Luc Marion makes available to theologians (certainly not only to them, but they are the ones who should be most able to appreciate it), an insight regarding prayer's resistance to various intellectually sophisticated forms of idolatry.[1] From Marion's earliest works to his most recent, he argues that prayer—and, in a sense, prayer alone—promises to free thought from the many idolatrous traps that it sets for itself. He not only offers a diagnosis of the problem of a specifically conceptual idolatry, especially as it arises in the philosophical

[1] I would like to thank Peter Fritz, Brian Robinette, Brian Hamilton, and Elizabeth Antus for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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and theological traditions of the West; he also presents prayer—the desiring and praising of divine charity—as the only promising remedy to this problem. His theological writings circle very closely around this insight, and there are ways in which his philosophical arguments must also be interpreted in light of it. In fact, there are reasons to believe that this insight is the key to understanding Marion's work as a whole.

This way of reading Marion addresses two concerns that theologians tend to have about his project. The first is about his negotiation of disciplinary boundaries and relationships. Does Marion argue more nearly as philosopher or as theologian? And what (possibly compromising) consequences might his particular style of interdisciplinarity hold in store for Christian discourse? The second concern is about his attitude toward a long-standing theological tradition that names God in terms of, or in some positive connection with, being. Does Marion unjustly dismiss this heritage? In response to these concerns, I shall argue that the ability to recognize Marion's prayerful confrontation with idolatry as the gravitational center of his thought allows one to discover a certain kind of theological (as opposed to philosophical) priority in his works and, moreover, to interpret his demurrals of ontology in a theologically sensitive manner. In short, the perspective of prayer gives Marion one viable way to respond to these two prevalent areas of theological objection.[2]

The present article is organized in two parts. The first part gives greater specificity to the theologically relevant questions about Marion's work that are under consideration here and sketches a brief response to them. The second part refines this response through a closer engagement with the issues surrounding a small sampling of his texts. In the end, we shall see that Marion's recent study of Augustine, *In the Self's Place*, becomes especially decisive for this argument. This book on Augustine not only recovers Marion's earlier prayerful and theological reflections, which are grounded largely in a retrieval of Dionysius the Areopagite, but also builds on them in new ways and uses them to integrate the positions that Marion has developed in numerous philosophical and theological debates over the years. Without

[2] Although these two areas of possible objection are pivotal, they do not exhaust all of the questions that theologians might wish to ask about Marion's work. Other important theological issues, especially related to his sacramental and scriptural hermeneutics, have been discussed in Shane Mackinlay, "Eyes Wide Shut: A Response to Jean-Luc Marion's Account of the Journey to Emmaus," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 3 (July 2004): 447–56; Brian Robinette, "A Gift to Theology? Jean-Luc Marion's 'Saturated Phenomena' in Christological Perspective," *Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007): 86–108; and Joseph Rivera, "*Corpus Mysticum* and Religious Experience: Henry, Lacoste, and Marion," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14, no. 3 (July 2012): 327–49.

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the text on Augustine, this theological reading of Marion would have to be somewhat tentative, at least as an account of the holistic meaning of his work. But with this text, such a reading becomes almost unavoidable.

I. The Argument in Brief

In order to develop this theological account of Marion's thought, we need to reflect further on two kinds of questions that his work tends to provoke among theologians. First, as noted above, there are questions about whether philosophy or theology ultimately has priority for him. To specify this issue, one needs first to consider what sorts of philosophy and theology he has in mind. With respect to his philosophy, the convention has been to distinguish his historical treatments of Descartes from his phenomenological accounts of givenness, saturation, and *eros* and to recognize in the latter works a more prescriptive philosophical intention. When speaking about Marion's theology, it is best to focus on his direct interpretations of Christianity's petitionary, hymnic, eucharistic, mystical, confessional, and iconological practices of prayer,[3] since, he claims, these practices are the proper sites for theology and give it its best points of interpretive access to the scripturally and traditionally mediated forms of divine revelation and divine distance. For Marion, theology is prayerful in these ways or it is idolatrous. Without such prayer, theology can be theo*logical* (discursive about some sort of "god") but not genuinely *theo*logical (reverently receptive to the truly divine God).[4]

There are interpreters in theology who worry that Marion cedes too much ground to nontheological interests. His philosophical readers (following Dominique Janicaud) generally have the opposite concern.[5] But whatever perspective one adopts, whether philosophical or theological, the interpretive

[3] The experience of counter-intentionality before the icon is arguably Marion's most privileged symbol for the relationships of asymmetrical freedom, the visibility of invisibility, and the self-denuding exposure before God that characterize prayer in each of the forms that he treats it.

[4] Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 20 and 194; Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 139–44; and Marion, *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 19.

[5] Dominique Janicaud's philosophical critique appears in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 50–66. Kevin Hart, ed., *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) contains several theological critiques, which we shall consider below.

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challenge remains very similar: how to comprehend Marion's two (or more) voices. One may insist that the voices are different and should simply be left that way. However, even a relatively disinterested exposition of Marion's thought must deal, at some point, with the question of his priorities, which is to say the question of the constitution of his work as an integral whole. The meaning of each element is partly determined by this broader question. Another inevitable challenge for any interpreter is how to specify the nature of any such prioritization: does it entail a diminishment or negation of either philosophy or theology? Or does it achieve a mutually preservative relationship between the two? And in either case, how exactly is the relationship conceived?

Theologians may have a strong stake in reading Marion theologically or, if this seems implausible, then in holding their ground against any theology-distorting version of his discourse. But some philosophers may also delight in the possibility of a theological reading if they believe that this would decrease the credibility of his already suspiciously postsecular thought. Regardless, without pretending any pure neutrality, one must make some effort to understand Marion's holistic vision on its own terms. To this end, I shall argue that prayerful theology is central to the collective significance of his texts (for better or worse). At the same time, by discussing his prayerful motivations, I confess that I shall seek not only to clarify but also to recommend them, albeit in a way that avoids any simplistic antagonism with philosophy.

Second, theologians tend to have questions regarding the meaning, the warrants, and the consequences of Marion's purported break with ontology. As he construes it, ontology is not exhausted by metaphysics, which he interprets largely along the lines of Heidegger's critical account of metaphysics' "onto-theo-logical constitution."[6] Ontology also permeates a great deal of Heidegger's own postmetaphysical phenomenology or post-phenomenological thinking, insofar as these intellectual efforts continue to be concerned with being as it is given for *Dasein* (finite existence) and as *Ereignis* (event of appropriation).[7] As a term, Marion recognizes that "ontology" (*ontologia*) first surfaces in the philosophical works of Rudolph Goclenius and Johannes Clauberg in the seventeenth century.[8] However, the discourse of

[6] See Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[7] Marion, *God without Being*, 41–43.

[8] Jean-Luc Marion, *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism: The Constitution and the Limits of Onto-Theo-Logy in Cartesian Thought*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 73.

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being to which this term most broadly refers may be found even in contexts where the word "ontology" does not appear.

If the discourse of being is what one means by "ontology," then this term can be given stronger and weaker senses, which might be used to recognize distinct kinds of cases. This differentiation is an important tool in the effort to overcome certain ambiguities in Marion's trans-ontological rhetoric ("without being") and its reception. The understanding of being as an absolute horizon constitutes a strong sense of ontology; here, being would provide the inescapable logic or language game that regulates all others, even theology. This strong sense of ontology (which appears in metaphysics and, differently, in Heidegger's writings) is Marion's primary target. A weaker sense of the term could be understood as encompassing any reference to being, including those references in which there is no presupposition of being's absoluteness (i.e., no commitment to its primacy for thought or to its omnicompetence as a discourse). This weakening of the term need not imply a reduction of the ontological to the ontic (i.e., to the realm of particular beings). On the contrary, there can be a sense of being itself that remains nontotalizing because it is located within a still greater horizon or perhaps lack thereof. This weaker sort of ontology would entail at least some intimation of that which transcends being: the trans-ontological. I shall argue that Marion remains, under some additional phenomenological and prayerful conditions, open to a weaker ontology of this sort.[9]

One significant question in this area has to do with the precise meaning of Marion's trans-ontological thought—that is, what uses of being it allows or disallows. Another question concerns what Marion's turn to the trans-ontological is meant to accomplish—that is, what are his warrants for avoiding or affirming being in any given instance. And a final question is whether Marion's goals can be achieved without paying too great a price. All of these questions, especially the last, are important for theologians, particularly those whose theological sensibilities have been steeped in the tradition of Exodus

[9] The strongest and most problematic cases of ontology are those that treat being not only as an absolute but also as a univocal concept. However, univocity is not Marion's only worry. As a result, the "analogy of being" does not seem to alleviate all of his concerns. This is one of the major points on which Marion and John Milbank differ. Milbank maintains that ontology becomes idolatrous only with the arrival of univocity (Duns Scotus) and that Marion is problematically inclined to elevate goodness over being only because he does not sufficiently appreciate the convertibility of the transcendentals that is part of the traditional doctrine of analogy. See John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 45–46. Nevertheless, Marion may be right to scrutinize even analogical ontologies and to question whether convertibility is all that must be said about the relation of the transcendentals. At least, something might be gained from pondering the reasons for Marion's more stringent standard of nonidolatrous thinking.

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3:14, that highly influential tradition that has led many to cherish being as one —or perhaps even as the very highest—divine name, notwithstanding certain thorny issues of translation. Here Aquinas' position is exemplary for Marion but also rather complicated, as we shall see.

In short, then, there are concerns about the nature of Marion's interdisciplinarity and about his trans-ontological commitments. What can be said about these two issues? In response to the first, this article seeks to show that a theological perspective rooted in prayer enjoys a certain temporal and, more decisively, conceptual precedence over phenomenology in Marion's corpus. This precedence appears in 1977 with *The Idol and Distance* and also continues to characterize his well-known 1982 text, *God without Being*, along with other early theological works.[10] That these texts were produced before his phenomenological books is perhaps somewhat suggestive. But what is really crucial here is the conceptual priority that they establish for prayer—that is, their defense of the view that any nonidolatrous thinking must necessarily be prayerful thinking. Nevertheless, from *Reduction and Givenness* in 1989 through *The Erotic Phenomenon* in 2003, Marion turns his attention in a rather bold and explicit way toward an attempted revitalization of phenomenology. Thus, despite the temporal precedence of prayer in his corpus, its conceptual priority could seem for a time to be superseded by the demands of a new phenomenological method, which, while treating some theological themes, relies fundamentally on a reconfiguration of Edmund Husserl's reduction to immanence. If prayer plays a role in this post-Husserlian language game, its status is perhaps no longer primary.[11]

However, since 2008, with the arrival of *In the Self's Place*, it has become possible to argue that prayer has not only the first but also the consummate word in Marion's thought, even if other more recognizably philosophical treatises continue to appear.[12] Throughout his reading of Augustine, Marion

[10] See, for example, Marion's early Augustinian articles, such as "Distance et béatitude: Sur le mot capacitas chez Saint Augustin," *Résurrection* 29 (1968): 58–80 and "La saisie trinitaire selon l'Esprit de saint Augustin," *Résurrection* 28 (1968): 66–94, and his 1986 text *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

[11] This is roughly how Robyn Horner narrates the development in *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005). Horner also seems to applaud the shift in emphasis from theology to phenomenology. Notwithstanding its subtitle, this text does more to promote a phenomenological overcoming of Marion's supposedly too dogmatic *theo*logy than to clarify the abiding promise of such a *theo*logy (x, 105, and 149).

[12] Whether Marion's *Certitudes négatives* (Paris: Grasset, 2010) belongs more strictly to philosophy or theology is a question that warrants its own sustained treatment, but

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allows the explicitly prayerful and theological voice of his earlier works to re-emerge, having been enhanced by the many phenomenological insights that he acquired in the interim. These intervening philosophical efforts can now be interpreted, not as a turn away from prayer, but rather as a lengthy preparation for its definitive return. With Dionysius and Augustine, Marion points to an enormous array of types of prayerful theology within the Christian tradition, both East and West, and demonstrates prayer's abiding relevance in any ongoing efforts to resist conceptual idolatry. This is arguably his most remarkable theological achievement. Moreover, his desire to move beyond an absolutized ontology and, indeed, the broader sweep of his philosophical output, including even his many historical works on Descartes, need to be situated in this prayerfully theological context if one hopes to understand what is most deeply at stake in them.[13]

I do not claim that Marion's motivations are theological to the exclusion of being philosophical. On the contrary, I claim that they are theological in a very inclusive sense, which allows him, in certain philosophically specified contexts, to satisfy his own painstakingly defended accounts of the central demands that are definitive of the phenomenological tradition. Marion proposes updating some of the stipulated rules of phenomenology for good intrinsic phenomenological reasons.[14] One must acknowledge this level of phenomenological fidelity while simultaneously recognizing that Marion also points the way toward a different kind of strictly theological thought that, starting from and culminating with prayer, seeks more than even such a radically revised phenomenology has to offer. This sort of prayerful thought not only reveals the limits of his phenomenology but also opens up a space in which it can take on an iconic significance and thereby serve the ends of a *theo*logical confrontation with idolatry.

To be sure, there are some respects in which Marion's new phenomenology already includes a particular kind of theology, even a kind of theology that is informed by prayer. Thus, instead of a one-sided inclusion of phenomenology in the more adequately iconic space of a prayerful theology, there seems

the possibility of a theological reading is at least indicated by Marion's rehearsals of key arguments from *The Idol and Distance* and *In the Self's Place* (35–39 and 87–96).

[13] In *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), Christina Gschwandtner persuasively argues that Marion's Cartesian studies play an important role in shaping the problematic of his phenomenological and theological writings and, moreover, that Marion's attraction to Pascal as an alternative to Descartes may give some indication of the genuinely theological aspirations of Marion's larger project.

[14] For a detailed analysis of these phenomenological reasons, see Kevin Hart's introduction to *Counter-Experiences*, especially 3–28.

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in fact to be a mutual inclusion—or highly complicated convergence—of the two approaches. In short, both the prayer-derived theology that occurs in the rule-bound terrain of phenomenology and the phenomenology-inclusive theology that takes its bearings unequivocally from the mystery of prayer have a great deal in common. Both require respect for givens and the manners of their donation, especially those givens that exceed the aims of intentionality, including maximally excessive divine givens.[15]

Nevertheless, of the two, only the more unambiguously prayerful theology praises or makes requests of an actual divine giver. The supremely excessive distance (i.e., independent, transcendent, Trinitarian actuality) of the divine addressee of prayer exceeds the "immanent" or "reduced" excess of the possible or impossible presence of God, qua "saturated phenomenon *par excellence,*" which Marion argues is available for phenomenological description.[16] The difference between these two discourses, which has the name of "distance," seems to decide whether prayer as such or only its nontranscendent phenomenalization is able to enliven thought. Philosophers may have their own questions about the persuasiveness of Marion's distinction between a possible and actual revelation. But the more pressing theological issue is whether a distance-affirming act of prayer really matters for Marion. In short, is he more interested in achieving some stipulated phenomenological certainty by bracketing the God to whom Christians pray, or in thinking rigorously and freely from the perspective of such prayer? Especially after the book on Augustine, his thought as a whole seems to correspond more closely to the second of these two options.

Hence, granting that there is a partial inclusion of theology in Marion's phenomenology (an inclusion that does not necessarily violate the rules of phenomenology), it is also important to recognize that Marion initially and finally contends that the requirements of theo*logy* as such (i.e., the traits belonging to the discourse and practice of Christian prayer) should be paramount. This claim certainly holds for the avid believer, but also perhaps for anyone who can be led to see its promise. Minimally, it holds for Marion's own theoretical project. Prayerful theology thus arises as the more integrative of his two styles of thought. Studied as a whole, his work suggests that finite

[15] Thomas Carlson elucidates the close connections between Marion's two projects in his "Translator's Introduction" to Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, xi–xxxi, and in Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 193–214.

[16] See Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 158–62.

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consciousness—the *ego* and its descendants, even *l'adonné*[17]—must return to confession if it aspires to approach God, and even the worldly manifestations of things, in a nonidolatrous manner. Phenomenology alone, however perfected or paradoxical it may become, will not suffice to counteract the problems of idolatry, which for Marion are the gravest problems of human cognition and existence in general.

This way of addressing the first set of questions regarding Marion's priorities has a direct bearing on how one can best approach the second set of questions, which concern his stance toward ontology. A prayerful respect for distance is what first prompts Marion to identify certain metaphysical and phenomenological ontologies as major examples of conceptual idolatry. He understands conceptual idolatry as a loss of such distance. As he explains it, this loss is sustained by any discourse that chooses either not to pray or, perhaps more self-deceptively, to pray only to a "god" whose meaning and presence are within its reach and under its control: for example, a "god" that is reducible to the functions that are prepared for it by a finite conception of being. In Marion's rhetoric, the word "being" becomes a perhaps somewhat too simple shorthand for this larger and more complex temptation.

Although Marion argues that a trans-ontological form of prayerful theology based largely on Dionysius, and more recently on Augustine, provides what is necessary to overcome the idolatrous tendencies of certain "strongly" ontological traditions (which absolutize being), he does not thereby disqualify the idea that a "weakly" ontological form of prayerful theology (which would refer to being without treating it as an absolute) could be employed as part of a compelling response to the same dangers.[18] Even though he consistently disputes the primacy of *esse*, he does not rule out using it as one divine name among others. More importantly, he even encourages this usage under the appropriate prayerful conditions (which include but are not limited to analogical conditions). In short, for Marion, the mere invocation of being, or more provocatively of God as being, does not imply idolatry. Additional questions about the prayerfulness and *kind* of prayerfulness of one's thought need to be asked before making this sort of determination. Hence, for those students of Aquinas (and other "being-friendly" theologians) who are understandably

[17] For Marion's evolving view of *l'adonné* (the "gifted"), see Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 247–319; and Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 56–100.

[18] A trans-ontological inclusion of a weakened ontology also appears in Marion's phenomenology of givenness. See Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina Gschwandtner *et al.* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 58.

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wary of cutting all ties with ontology, Marion's project has the potential to be *somewhat* less disconcerting than it first appears, even if it remains open to further debate.[19]

If both phenomenology and ontology can be taken up into prayer and thereby liberated from the otherwise imminent threats of conceptual idolatry that their absolutizations would imply, it does not follow that just any sort of thought or action that falls under the name of "prayer" will unproblematically achieve this end. Indeed, it is conceivable that none will. As Saint Paul continues to remind us, we do not know how to pray as we ought (Rom 8:26). Marion likewise recognizes that prayer, or a superficially similar practice possessing many of the external traits of prayer, can transpire before the idol.[20] Nevertheless, if there is a place in which God can be desired and adored in the manners that are appropriate to God's incomprehensible divinity and charity, this place will be nothing other than that which is opened up by prayer's truest possibilities. Indeed, there is a very humble kind of prayer that hopes only that it indeed is prayer, and believes that this is what it must hope for above all. Perhaps this, too, is a fitting way to characterize Marion's thought.

In order to defend this interpretation of Marion and to bring out some of its nuances, I shall take a closer look at the issues surrounding four texts: *The Idol and Distance*, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," *In Excess*, and *In the Self's Place*. Space does not permit a detailed engagement with Marion's entire corpus, but these writings at least give us some of the major turning points. The first announces the primacy of prayer in a hard-fought, and perhaps victorious, debate with Heidegger. The second shows that even if *God without Being* had asked us to scrutinize Aquinas, the final result of this scrutiny would, and should, not have been a simplistically negative judgment. The third displays, perhaps in spite of itself, the temptation of an apology that wants to be certain of its position but not lose sight of that which it truly loves, an apology before the tribunals of apodictic phenomenology and apodictic deconstruction. The fourth is a homecoming in a distant land, in which the enigmas of an intellectual itinerary are clarified without ceasing to be enigmatic, and in which prayer takes hold not only of a discourse but also of a self—Augustine, Marion, perhaps you or I—such is more than an implicit hope of this latest "confessional" text.

[19] Marion's desire to leave room for philosophy, while prioritizing theology, may also be welcomed by Thomists, notwithstanding the clear differences in emphasis and context that continue to divide Marion and Aquinas.

[20] Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 5.

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II. The Traverse of Distance

One would be right to classify *The Idol and Distance* as a work of theology. However, its arguments are mainly with philosophers, and with Heidegger above all the rest. When Marion discusses Friedrich Nietzsche and Friedrich Hölderlin, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, Heidegger remains present as the central figure who has given unavoidable interpretations to the former pair and paved the way for the latter.[21] When Marion treats earlier thinkers in the philosophical canon (from Plato through Hegel), Heidegger's exegesis of these figures and his overarching suspicion of metaphysics provide the operative hermeneutic.[22] Even Marion's engagements with Hans Urs von Balthasar, Dionysius the Areopagite, and the apostle Paul seem primarily intended to demonstrate in what respects Heideggerian thought, together with its progenitors and inheritors, needs to be partly affirmed and decisively resisted from a Christian theological perspective.[23] Therefore, although the text is theological, what it offers is in fact a theological judgment of certain kinds of philosophy. *The Idol and Distance* is not merely an exposition of Christian revelation for Christians. It is also an attempt to show how certain Christian sources, in comparison with several major sources of postmetaphysical philosophy, more reliably convey something crucial in which both parties have an interest.

Marion calls this something "distance." In its most general sense, this term points toward a wide array of mystery-rich alternatives to the conceptual idolatry of the metaphysical tradition. Marion argues, on the one hand, that such alternatives are what much postmetaphysical philosophy seems to be seeking, particularly with its announcement of the "death of God," together with certain of its affirmative recommendations for dealing with this "death": the *Übermensch*, the poetic measure, the ontological difference, the other, *la différance*.[24] On the other hand, he contends that there is a particular way of understanding Christian theology that comes closer to reaching the somewhat shared goal of a nonidolatrous thinking. According to Marion, Christian theology does not properly entail the sort of distance-concealing or "God-killing" conceptual idolatry that seems, in his judgment and in the judgments of Heidegger et al., to be endemic to metaphysics. On the contrary, Christian theology offers the greatest iconic manifestation of distance. Marion suggests that the best Christian theologians (such as Dionysius and his followers) know what it means to proclaim the death of God, precisely

[21] Ibid., 27, 91, 216, and 226.
[22] Ibid., 9–17.
[23] Ibid., 19, 142, and 245–53.
[24] Ibid., xxxvi, 44, 93, and 216.

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through their memory of the Son's unfathomable death on the cross. They also know what it means to shatter every conceptual idol with a nonpredicative discourse of request and praise, through which they pragmatically revere but do not comprehend the infinite source of all things.[25] Despite certain historical entanglements, Christian theology is therefore not isomorphic with any metaphysical framing of reality that would turn "God" into a mere grounding function of philosophical consciousness, the sort of conceptual idol (as *causa sui*) that Heidegger suggests cancels out the possibility of prayer.[26] Rather, Christian theology shelters the very experience of prayer that most adequately overcomes such idolatry.

As one can already begin to see, Marion does not interpret Christian theology as just one form of distance among others. It is not, for him, just one interchangeable example of a broad set of idolatry-transcending discourses. Rather, it is the definitive example. The particular Trinitarian, Christological, and anthropological mysteries that are evident in Christian traditions of prayerful theology open up, within Marion's account, a more specific sense of distance that profoundly affects his interpretation of all the others. In each chapter, Marion shows that the writings of Heidegger and company are able to approximate distance only by partly reflecting these determinate Christian mysteries, with varying degrees of adequacy and inadequacy. In this sense, distance is not, even as applied to these postmetaphysical philosophers, merely a formal term for the opposite of conceptual idolatry or the overcoming of metaphysics. It is a positive symbol for the relationships of freedom and love between Father, Son, and Spirit, between the saving God and sinful creation, and between all of God's heavenly and earthly creatures. It is a marker of the irreducible abysses that sustain endless desire and allow (paradoxically) for an ever-greater intimacy within all of these concrete relationships.[27]

Through his reading of Dionysius, Marion argues that prayer's supplications and hymns are uniquely able to traverse this distance (or distances) without abolishing it (or them).[28] Prayer can pass through these unbridgeable spaces without attempting to reduce them to a grand system of metaphysical speculation—as Heidegger finds, paradigmatically, in Hegel—or to any other

[25] Ibid., 139–95. Marion draws here on J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, which approaches certain uses of language in terms of what they do and not merely what they say. With some significant modifications, this theory clarifies the nonpredicative operations of prayer.

[26] Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 72.

[27] Marion takes up these points again in his reading of the Gospel of John in *Prolegomena to Charity*, 137–45.

[28] Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 160.

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kind of overconfident predicative discourse. Prayer can do this insofar as it humbly receives, seeks, and returns gifts in relationship with a divine giver without daring to assign, for the sake of its own self-grounded certainty, a philosophically mandated essence or function to this giver. The one who prays enters a drama that has already begun, becomes a guest in an inexhaustible region of grace and wonder, and cannot preside over them with an air of serene conceptual mastery.

At the same time, the fact that prayer offers some potential for traversing distance is no less significant than the respect that it shows for distance. Prayer seeks not merely to reject the conceptual idols, with a generalized apophatics,[29] but to behold the icon of infinite charity in the palpable face of the crucified one, who perfectly embodies the prayerful roles of both "requestant" and "Requisite."[30] Prayer thus brings one into the specific Chalcedonian and paschal mysteries of Christ's humanity and divinity. Furthermore, it is precisely through prayer that one can receive oneself ecstatically from distance, as someone loved and given anteriorly by the creative power of goodness itself (i.e., as "gifted"). Prayer likewise draws one into the divinely originate and ethically obligating practice of charity that one is meant to share in solidaristic communion with one's neighbors.[31] In all of these ways, and more, prayer gives access to the "content" of distance without idolizing it.

Marion's extensive use of Dionysius in this text, and the typical association of Dionysius with "negative theology," could mislead one to think that Marion's argument hinges mainly on negation. But this is far from the case. The argument of *The Idol and Distance* relies on a more richly theological reading of Dionysius, made possible especially by Balthasar's treatment in the second volume of *The Glory of the Lord*,[32] in which developing a prayerfully loving relationship with love itself and with all of love's creatures is quite clearly the point. In short, what we find in this early work of Marion's is a theological voice, steeped in the traditions of Christian prayer, intervening in and seeking to overcome the limits of an apparently philosophical (but also somewhat surreptitiously theological) conversation.

Having thus glimpsed Marion's particular way of prioritizing prayerful theology over philosophy in *The Idol and Distance*, we must now ask about

[29] It is on this point that Marion's approach differs most decisively from John Caputo's. See John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 55–57.

[30] Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 172.

[31] Ibid., 153 and 169.

[32] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* vol. 2*, Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil, CRV, and ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 144–210.

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the status of ontology in this text. The response to this question depends on whose discourse of being one has in mind. If Aquinas', then Marion's assessment is not merely negative but rather mixed. Marion recognizes that, in addition to being an influence on the modern metaphysical projects of Malebranche, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hegel, Aquinas is also a saint and a serious transmitter of Dionysius' doctrine of divine names.[33] These latter qualifications complicate any possibility of identifying Aquinas' theology with conceptual idolatry. Marion argues that such idolatry occurs only when we arrange "a presence of the divine without distance, in a god who reflects back to us our experience or thought, with enough familiarity that we always master its play."[34] He finds this mechanism at work in the tradition of metaphysics and accepts Heidegger's judgment that one cannot pray, or pray truly, to a god that is conceived in this manner. However, Marion does not conclude that Heidegger's judgment implicates Aquinas' thought as such but only certain questionably metaphysical aspects of it (such as the five "proofs") or, perhaps even more charitably, only certain later adaptations.

If the question of the status of ontology is posed in relation to Heidegger's roughly phenomenological approach to being, then matters are again complicated, but in a different way. Marion grants that Heidegger, through the exposition of the ontological difference, thinks in a manner that differs significantly from metaphysics, insofar as he attempts to think the difference as such. Nevertheless, Marion also resists Heidegger's tendency to let being, whether thought from the perspective of *Dasein* or the "Fourfold," regulate any possible appearance of the divine. Thus Heidegger represents a postmetaphysical, but still ontological, type of conceptual idolatry in Marion's account. However, this is not the end of the story. Marion also finds some affinity with distance in Heidegger's discussion of the "withdrawal" that gives being as an event (*Ereignis*). Marion even believes that this affinity may be strong enough to allow a Heideggerian thinking of being to be "forgiven" and welcomed as an icon of the very distance that it seems to deny.[35]

Marion takes this last point directly from the fifth volume of Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord*.[36] If being is not treated as an absolute that comprehends all things, but rather as a gift that arrives from distance, it can be affirmed and

[33] Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 11.

[34] Ibid., 9.

[35] Ibid., 198–215 and 233–53.

[36] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* vol. 5, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, CRV, John Saward, and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 613–56.

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taken up into the prayerful practice of theology as one among many divine names. Indeed, a theology that includes this weaker and properly relativized kind of ontology (in continuity with Exodus 3:14) is more attractive to Marion than would be any discourse, such as Levinas' ethics of alterity or Derrida's rhetoric of *différance*, which intends to surpass ontology without doing so in a primarily prayerful way.[37] Ultimately, therefore, it is not enough to characterize *The Idol and Distance* as a theological and trans-ontological work; one must recognize that it is a prayerfully theological confrontation with philosophy, on issues of conceptual idolatry that are to some extent held in common, which encourages one to be suspicious of the idolatrous functioning of ontology but also to embrace certain instances of ontology that have a clear potential to be iconic.

III. The Recovery of *Esse*

Although the possibility of a compelling defense of Aquinas' theology in relation to certain Heideggerian doubts is already foreshadowed by *The Idol and Distance*, Marion does not attempt it explicitly until "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy."

Before discussing this article, however, I must clarify a few points about *God without Being*. One should not exaggerate the gravity of Marion's critical engagement with Aquinas in this work. Notwithstanding a provocative title that was perhaps already sufficiently troubling for Thomists, many of Marion's arguments concerning Aquinas are milder and less controvertible than they are often purported to be.[38] It is true that Marion openly resists Aquinas' decision to prioritize the name of being over that of goodness, but his position on this issue is hardly unusual: there is a long theological tradition before him (exemplified by Dionysius, Bonaventure, and others) that supports his preference. Moreover, this is not a preference that Marion ever recants.

Second, although Marion discusses several ways in which Aquinas' theology may be, at least in its effects, implicated in the history of metaphysics, he does not later change his mind about the dangers that worry him here. He simply provides more details regarding a way to read Aquinas that largely evades them. Marion is already well aware in *God without Being*, as he was in *The Idol and Distance*, that there is a Dionysian undercurrent in Aquinas that may resolve the bulk of the difficulties. What he finds in Aquinas' work is not

[37] Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 141–42.

[38] Brian Shanley, OP, "St. Thomas Aquinas, Onto-Theology, and Marion," *The Thomist* 60 (1996): 617–25, for example, maintains that Marion repudiates *God without Being* with an unequivocal "*retractio*."

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so much grounds for indictment as signs of a troubling point of "indecision."[39] Marion senses a historically significant movement in one direction (onto-theology) and another (praise) and treats Aquinas as a crossroads. In short, *God without Being* does not condone a simplistic rejection of Aquinas.[40] Nor, as we shall see, does "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy" offer a blanket endorsement of just any way of retrieving Aquinas.

In this latter text, Marion explicitly seeks to "balance" his earlier assessment of Aquinas on two issues—namely, whether Aquinas reduces being to the concept of entity and whether his doctrine of God succumbs to any kind of conceptual idolatry.[41] Whereas in *God without Being* Marion emphasizes the dubitability of Aquinas' theology on both counts, in "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy" he develops a series of arguments that support the opposite conclusions. Here, though, it is simply the same Dionysian Aquinas, already glimpsed in the earlier writings, who finally prevails. Marion recommends a way of reading Aquinas that takes every opportunity, always with ample textual support, to distance Aquinas' thought from the characteristics that Heidegger identifies with the onto-theo-logical constitution.

Marion argues that, for Aquinas, God is not entity but *esse*, and these are not the same. God is in no way caused but is the cause of all, including not only entities but also creaturely being itself. Moreover, neither term, *causa* or *esse*, gives us knowledge of the essence of God. Nor do they, when used for God, strictly belong to the essence of being as it is understood metaphysically or phenomenologically. Indeed, the analogical deployment of these words functions in Aquinas not so much to unite God and created existence conceptually as to mark the unfathomable gap between them. Therefore, even the causative *esse* that Aquinas associates with God must be conceived as beyond metaphysics and perhaps, to speak paradoxically, as "without being." Marion concludes that Aquinas contemplates this *esse* starting from a divine distance that it neither comprehends nor strictly names. Marion calls this interpretation of Aquinas a "hypothesis," but the evidence that he gives for it makes it at least somewhat plausible.[42]

Having in this way defended the viability of a proper theological use of *esse* along Thomistic lines, Marion continues to remind his readers of certain

[39] Marion, *God without Being*, 81.

[40] Fergus Kerr, OP, already suggests this point in his "Aquinas after Marion," *New Blackfriars* 76, no. 895 (July/August 1995): 354–64. He concludes that "God 'without Being' may have been the One whom St. Thomas had in mind all along" (364).

[41] Jean-Luc Marion, "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 67 n. 2.

[42] Ibid., 66.

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dangers. His remarks regarding the widespread tendency to situate Aquinas' doctrine of God within the limits of a philosophical account of being and to ignore the serious threat that this approach poses to the recognition of distance are certainly consistent with his earlier statements. Likewise, the Dionysian conditions that legitimate an inclusion or necessitate an exclusion of being within or from theological discourse remain fundamentally unchanged. If Aquinas now seems more likely to succeed, it is because he now seems more available to be interpreted in line with Marion's innovative retrieval of Dionysian praise. At issue, still, is the task of thinking clearly about a God that, notwithstanding this thinking, remains worthy of prayer and adoration—that is, a God who is truly God and not merely an idol. Moreover, as in *The Idol and Distance*, so too here, Marion's preoccupation with the prayerful authenticity of theology both complicates the status of ontology and poses a challenge to the supposed primacy or sufficiency of philosophy. These topics are very much at issue in the debates surrounding Marion's specifically phenomenological work, as crystallized in *In Excess*.

IV. The Public Defense

The legitimacy of Marion's phenomenology has been challenged from at least three different directions, which might be called (respectively) phenomenological, deconstructive, and theological. First, concerns have emerged from within the classical tradition of phenomenology inaugurated by Husserl. Dominique Janicaud represents this tradition and takes its authority for granted in his critical account of an illegitimate "theological turn" in the work of Marion and others (including the post-*Kehre* Heidegger, Levinas, Michel Henry, and Jean-Louis Chrétien). In Janicaud's judgment, these thinkers have begun to stretch phenomenology beyond its methodologically validating (and principally Husserlian) limits. Janicaud believes that some revisions, such as those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur, have been more faithful to the original protocols while valuably contesting certain Husserlian tendencies toward an idealist egology. In short, Janicaud does not restrict phenomenology merely to the letter of Husserl.[43] But some departures from this source seem, to Janicaud, to go too far. He warns that these departures may compromise the rigor and credibility of the whole enterprise. In all such cases, he finds an unwarranted consideration of some prohibited transcendence.

[43] Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn,"* 27 and 34.

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Marion's main strategy in response to this charge has been to deny the fairness of its application, not of its basic premises. Husserl's requirement of immanence does not, in Marion's view, disqualify phenomenological description of givenness, saturated phenomena, or the paradoxical possibility or impossibility of divine revelation, insofar as these can be discovered within consciousness. According to Marion, what Husserl rightly disqualifies—for phenomenologists, not for theologians—is the presupposition of the actuality of a divine giver or its actual revelation. Because Marion, qua phenomenologist, officially makes no such presupposition, he insists that his arguments along these lines remain strictly within bounds and, thereby, enjoy the same epistemic certainty that is supposedly characteristic of phenomenology in general. In Marion's opinion, Husserl was not wrong to demand apodictic knowledge and to institute rules that would (allegedly) safeguard it. He was only wrong to reduce immanence to objectivity instead of approaching it primarily in the broader, but no less immanent, terms of donation and saturation. Marion develops this sort of apology in *Being Given* and specifies it further in *In Excess*.[44]

A second perspective that has challenged the legitimacy of Marion's phenomenology has done so more nearly from the outside of this tradition, but still with a somewhat philosophical (which is to say here both critical and nontheological) set of concerns, as well as with an intimate knowledge of phenomenology: this is the perspective of Derrida. One of the reasons that *In Excess* may be treated as a crucial text for understanding Marion is that it contains a developed response, not only to Janicaud, but also to Derrida.[45] In this instance, Marion's effort to demonstrate his conformity to the methods of classical phenomenology will not persuade, since Derrida is fairly confident that even a properly regulated phenomenology cannot actually deliver on its promises of presence.[46] The proposed standard of success in this debate would seem to be not so much Husserl as Derrida himself, that is, a

[44] Marion, *Being Given*, 1–6; and Marion, *In Excess*, 1–29.

[45] See Marion, *In Excess*, 128–62, which contains a revised version of Marion's lecture "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology,'" which first appeared in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20–42. This responds to Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 3–70.

[46] "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion," in Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 67. See also Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison and Newton Carver (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

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Derridean level of suspicion. But if Marion were to win on these grounds, this would also be another way of conceding defeat, since what he would have would no longer be the sort of phenomenology that he wants, but rather deconstruction. Marion's only alternative, then, is simply to insist that Derrida's criteria may not be the best ones: what they gain in terms of critical awareness of the almost unintended intentionality that may produce any given discourse of phenomenalization (i.e., the semiotic genesis of "presence"), they lose in terms of interpretive openness to what is given and perhaps even given as impossibility, that is, as saturation. In short, Marion can contend that the attempt to describe the unconditioned conditions of an excess of intuition ought to be permissible.

But Derrida's intervention is interesting, inasmuch as he does not make only one kind of point. Although Derrida seems ultimately to desire a deconstruction of Christian theology, there is a way in which he also seems to encourage Marion simply to acknowledge and to claim his own (earlier) Christian theological point of view, especially since this theological approach might allow him to relinquish the misleading sense of epistemological security that Janicaud's and Husserl's account of phenomenology perhaps too uncritically presupposes. In other words, Derrida suggests that an openly pursued Christian theology of the gift, particularly one that is modeled by a thinker as complexly apophatic as Dionysius, may be somewhat preferable to a phenomenology that is overconfident about the solidity of its foundations.[47] Still, according to Derrida, both Dionysian praise and Husserlian analysis feign access to a legitimating presence that neither can demonstrate. Derrida is interested primarily in exposing the uncertainty of such positions (a kind of uncertainty he finds everywhere he looks), and in one way or another this line of scrutiny will inevitably extend to Marion's phenomenology *and* theology. No word can disconfirm Derrida's skeptical hypothesis regarding the genesis of these (or all) discursive traditions. But, precisely in this sense, deconstruction may remain too apodictic. At least, this is the point at which it might be questioned.

The third critical perspective that we shall consider here comes from the direction of Christian theology. Kathryn Tanner, John Milbank, Cyril O'Regan, and Emmanuel Falque articulate different versions of the central worry, which is this: to the extent that the needs of phenomenology and theology diverge, Marion may attend too much to the former and not enough to the latter.[48] The

[47] "On the Gift," 57.

[48] See Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 49, and the following articles in Hart, *Counter-Experiences*: Cyril O'Regan, "Jean-Luc Marion: Crossing Hegel," 95–150; Emmanuel Falque, "*Lavartus pro Deo*: Jean-Luc Marion's Phenomenology and Theology," 181–200;

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Catholics, Falque and O'Regan, are more reserved in their judgments. They believe that Marion could stand to remove his Cartesian "mask" (Falque) and show more vigilant resistance against Hegelian hauntings (O'Regan). However these measures would not necessarily invalidate Marion's phenomenological investigations, even of themes drawn from Christian revelation. They would simply bring these investigations into a larger discursive space that is unreservedly theological. There is no question here of confusing disciplines. Rather, the goal would be to examine the porous boundaries that already connect them and, moreover, to show clearly what is at stake in thinking from the theological side of the division.

Milbank and Tanner are, by comparison, more suspicious. They suggest that Marion's phenomenology reduplicates the conceptual idolatry that he had once effectively critiqued, whether by reducing revelation to a Kantian sublime (Milbank) or by construing givenness, despite all protestations to the contrary, as a quasi-Heideggerian horizon (Tanner). For Milbank and Tanner, Marion's turn to phenomenology is disputable, not merely because it is insufficiently integrated into a Christian way of thinking that knows the threats of an absolutizing philosophy, but because it is almost exclusively constituted as such a threat. For all of these critics, the exclusive immanence that defines the "saturated phenomenon *par excellence*" and Marion's investment in a Cartesian, Kantian, Hegelian, Husserlian, and Heideggerian lineage need to be treated with caution.

In the end, the Marion of *In Excess* may be caught in a triple bind. Insofar as he attempts to answer the philosophical queries of Janicaud and Derrida, he almost cannot help but incite the anxieties of theologians, whose standards are not those of the publics of phenomenology and deconstruction to which he addresses himself—and in which the attempt to make a convincing appeal to epistemic certainty, even of a negative kind, is virtually obligatory—but rather those of a Christian community that desires above all to give glory to God. Nevertheless, Marion's deepest loyalties are not entirely hidden in this text. If he endeavors to speak in words that non-Christian philosophers will hear, he also continues to speak and think under the influence of a theological tradition that has Dionysius—and even more profoundly, Christ—at its center.[49] A positive case could be made that Marion's approach here is closer to Aquinas' or Karl Rahner's than it is to Kant's, Hegel's, or

and Kathryn Tanner, "Theology at the Limits of Phenomenology," 201–31. Marion himself notes the problem: "If danger there must be here, it would reside more in the formal and, in a sense, still transcendental phenomenalization of the question of God than in some sort of theologization of phenomenality" (*Being Given*, 243).

[49] Marion, *In Excess*, 142–45 and 150–54.

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Heidegger's, insofar as the independence that Marion seems to grant phenomenology goes together, in his work, with a sense of a somewhat traditional disciplinary arrangement in which theology retains its own higher authority (at least for Christians).[50] But this response may not satisfy students of Barth or Balthasar, and perhaps, therefore, it may not even satisfy the Marion of *The Idol and Distance*. Should one conclude that he has, in the years between these texts, changed his mind about the urgency of a prayerfully theological overcoming of idolatry and the insufficiency of a purely phenomenological approach? Marion at least leaves room to debate the matter.

V. The Confessing Self

The question to be asked now is what difference Marion's *In the Self's Place* makes. In short, it takes Marion's previous phenomenological and theological contestations with Descartes, Heidegger, Husserl, and Derrida to a new level of complexity, while recovering and even deepening the prayerful affirmation of distance that appears in his earlier retrievals of Dionysius and Aquinas. In these ways, this work gathers together the major threads of Marion's career and weaves them into an impressive portrait of the Christian thinker and saint who had perhaps been in the background all along: Augustine.[51] More than his other texts, *In the Self's Place* permits a clear decision concerning the inclusively theological orientation of Marion's thought as a whole. It demonstrates that his revitalized mode of phenomenological description has something to contribute precisely to a confessional theology that recognizes the insufficiency of any mere phenomenology.

Although *The Erotic Phenomenon* had already offered another provocative engagement with Descartes, and precisely on the basis of the rather Augustinian theme of love, it did so still within the horizon of an anonymous givenness (Marion's version of the Heideggerian *es gibt*). *In the Self's Place* changes the strategy: Marion now claims that it is not any love whatsoever that calms the anxiety of the ego about the validity of its existence, but rather the infinite love of God that is poured out on creation and that mercifully embraces and heals the sinfully distorted image of God that Augustine finds in himself.[52] In this way, Marion suggests that Augustine's praise answers Descartes' profoundest doubt ("Am I loved?") more decisively than Marion's nontheological erotic reduction ever could.

[50] For this approach, see Peter Fritz, "Karl Rahner Repeated in Jean-Luc Marion?," *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 318–38.

[51] See Marion, "Distance et béatitude" and "La saisie trinitaire."

[52] Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 24; and Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 99.

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Furthermore, despite Heidegger's early attempt to configure it in this manner, the Augustinian self does not give itself primarily according to the categories of care, being, and so on that would eventually ground the existential analytic of *Being and Time*.[53] Nor can this self be understood merely in terms of any kind of post-Husserlian immanence. On the contrary, it is not only possibly, but always already actually constituted through its responsiveness to the transcendent Creator: the God who dwells in and *above* it.[54] Moreover, if its thinking allows for a reduction, it will be a reduction to a "first thought" that already praises this divine distance, that is, a reduction to confession itself.[55] Finally, this self does not, as Derrida might worry, preside serenely over a sphere of intended presence but rather endures the various delays, indeterminacies, and oblivions (in short, the modes of *différance*) that constitute its temporal life—but this temporality does not prevent it from contemplating (which is very different from comprehending) eternity.[56] Put concisely, Marion argues that the Augustinian self exceeds the competencies of Cartesian, Heideggerian, Husserlian, and Derridean philosophy precisely through its confession and, moreover, that it cannot be easily dismissed even from the highly challenging perspective of a Derridean deconstruction.

For a rigorous reading of Augustine, therefore, Marion believes we must pass beyond the positive and negative expectations of contemporary philosophy. It seems impossible here to avoid asking whether this might even include Marion's own phenomenological philosophy, notwithstanding his arguably successful efforts to use Augustine to confirm it. Even if Marion's philosophy comes closest (among all the sorts of philosophy) to accommodating Augustine's *confessio*, it does not appear thoroughly adequate to it and, thus, not entirely exceptional to the rule. The text proves, but does not emphasize, this point. Marion may, quite reasonably, be loath to underscore the limits of his newly minted phenomenological categories. But he must concede—and, in a way, even asks us to recognize—that an Augustinian style of prayerful thinking cannot be contained within them.

Indeed, Marion's admiration for the particularity of Augustine's thought is so great that he does not even accept "theology" as a proper description of it. For Marion, this term is either too ambiguous or simply incorrect. Augustine

[53] Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 145–64; and Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthew Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 115–84.

[54] Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 100. Cf. Marion, *Being Given*, 242.

[55] Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 13.

[56] Ibid., 205.

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himself recognizes that it could refer to various sorts of political or metaphysical idolatry in the Roman world. Moreover, Marion warns that it could easily give the erroneous impression that Augustine is primarily interested in writing something about God, that is, in producing a scholarly treatise on this or that theological topic. Against this perspective, Marion contends that Augustine writes in order to confess—his sins and, above all, his praise.[57] Augustine's discourse is, in this latter respect, very comparable to Dionysius' mystical theology and to any version of Aquinas' theology that Marion would welcome. If we can call Augustine's thought theological, we must mean by this that it is prayerful or, perhaps more precisely, doxological.

However, Marion does more here than enlist Augustine as another example of the Christian discourses of request and praise that he already analyzed in *The Idol and Distance*. Here Marion asks us to consider more directly a very peculiar kind of self that is given together with and through such discourses. This means uncovering, beyond the question of language games, some sense of the concrete struggles of a singular but relatable life, which seeks its beatitude and its very "place" in the infinity of God. Marion presents Augustine as a self that not only writes but also lives and becomes his confession. Such is the nature of Augustine's conversion from sin and of his embodied Christian witness, which Marion clarifies is not only communicated for himself but also for the sake of the church and humanity at large. As we have seen, Marion notes in *The Idol and Distance* that prayer requires someone to receive the gift and transmit it to others, by becoming it for them, but here this requirement comes to light more saliently. In Augustine, the prayerfully gifted and solidaristic self is put on display—perhaps one might even say phenomenalized. Nevertheless, it does not thereby lose its enigmatic or specifically Christian quality. On the contrary, the light that Marion shines on it only reveals, with ever more detail, its many Christomorphically theonomous mysteries and aporias.[58]

Although Marion continues to resist ontology in this work, once again he does so not primarily for philosophical reasons but for theological ones. He means to encourage appropriate praise for the simultaneously hidden and revealed God who transcends all predication. Marion grants that Augustine sometimes uses the name of being to approach God reverently. However, he also argues that Augustine generally prefers to use not *ipsum esse* but simply *idipsum*. Marion observes that this name, which tends to be somewhat anachronistically (that is, Thomistically) translated as "being," is more faithfully rendered as "itselfness" or "the identical." With it, Augustine aims at, but

[57] Ibid., 7–20.

[58] Ibid., 40–55 and 252–60. See also Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 166–69.

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does not therefore ontologically determine, the simplicity and singularity of God. Thus Marion suggests that the term *idipsum*, perhaps even more effectively than the apophatically construed *esse* that one finds in a properly interpreted Aquinas, leads the one who confesses it (as it does Augustine during his ascent with Monica at Ostia) into an immeasurable distance.[59]

VI. Conclusion

Above all, Marion gives us a fresh way to think about prayer and to think prayerfully. He gives this to us as a gift and, in a sense, as *the gift*—as the unearned freedom to participate in the endless giving that constitutes the inestimable distance and love of the triune God. He gives this gift in a complicated way that never refuses dialogue with contemporary philosophy and that, moreover, takes seriously its quasi-scientific aspirations for absolute certainty. Marion takes these aspirations so seriously that it is as though he sometimes becomes willing to suspend, or momentarily give up, his own deepest (Dionysian and Augustinian) longings. And yet, he never seems to do so entirely. There is always a trace of distance that calls one beyond the various forms that Marion studies under the headings of immanence. The gift of prayer that Marion gives is not, first and foremost, his gift, or his construction, but—at least he hopes—a gift that comes from the infinite source from whom we would only belatedly learn to request it. If it appears in his works, it does not do so in such a way that it would become wholly present. It does not arrive primarily as a being or as a phenomenon, and certainly not as one that he would comprehend. If these words receive and preserve any of it, this will be because they do not master its play. Prayer is, finally, only understood if it is itself given as gratitude and praise, and if its own truest possibilities are ceaselessly desired.

If this account of Marion is persuasive as an interpretation of his work, it still may not alleviate all of the concerns of his critics, especially the more philosophical ones.[60] Even readers who are more sympathetic to the prayerfully theological orientation outlined here may find in this article an impulse to think further, and perhaps more critically, about the details of Marion's arguments concerning Dionysius, Aquinas, or Augustine, or to wonder whether other theological sources (especially the many prayerful voices of women

[59] Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 289–306.

[60] Joeri Schrijvers perceives but also seems to lament the return to theology in Marion's study of Augustine. At the very least, he believes it needs a greater phenomenological corrective. See Joeri Schrijvers, "In (the) Place of the Self: A Critical Study of Marion's *Au lieu de soi. L'approche de Saint Augustin*," *Modern Theology* 25, no. 4 (October 2009): 661–86.

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and the liberative spiritualities of the countless victims of history) might add significant insight.[61] Nevertheless, whatever the ongoing disputes may be, this reading of Marion at least makes possible a renewed appreciation for his work from an explicitly theological perspective. It shows that neither the God who says "I Am" nor the rigorous disclosure of given, saturated, and erotic phenomena need be forsaken in order to follow Marion's thought in the direction of a trans-ontological hymn to divine charity itself or in the direction of a vocalized and embodied desire that wants only to welcome and interpret this charity without end. Any rival account of the significance of Marion's work as a whole must now contend with the remarkable arrival of the text on Augustine.

[61] Here I shall mention just one of the innumerable examples. What would Marion's understanding of prayer look like if it were put into dialogue with Ada María Isasi-Díaz's provocative essay, "To Struggle for Justice Is to Pray," in *Así Es: Stories of Hispanic Spirituality*, ed. Arturo Pérez *et al.* and trans. Sarah C. Pruett and Elena Sánchez Mora (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 16–20.

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