

## ***Marion on 'Truth as Saturated Phenomenon': Some Reflections***

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The focus here will be to provide a brief summary and analysis of Jean-Luc Marion's lecture: 'Saint Augustine on truth as saturated phenomenon'. Since this lecture is a shortened version of Chapter 3 in Marion's recent work on Augustine, I will refer to the more complete, published, English translation: 'Truth, or the Saturated Phenomenon', in *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*.<sup>1</sup> I will also make reference to earlier parts of the book that help to set up and clarify what he is doing here. Those who are not interested in a summary, or would not find this edifying, can feel free to simply skip down to my analysis below without fear of detracting from the nature of my comments. The main intent of the summary is to perhaps provide some guidance for those who may be a bit less familiar with the nature of Marion's work or area of specialisation. In my reflections, I have opted for suggestive comments that need much more elaboration, rather than simply arguing one or two points cogently. The goal is that these comments provoke further thought and discussion.

### **A Non-metaphysical Augustinian Approach**

For decades now Marion has been exploring the possibilities of a non-metaphysical theology, in view of the strong critiques of metaphysics following Nietzsche, Heidegger, and deconstruction. Here Marion furthers this work, now enlisting St. Augustine as an exemplar of such a non-metaphysical approach. Thus Marion seeks a demonstration of how Augustine's approach not only eludes the critiques of metaphysics, but also exemplifies a much more radical approach that supplants those characterised as metaphysical. Here, Marion's aims are threefold: 1) highlighting how Augustine's reference to God in human language does not succumb to post-metaphysical critiques of idolatrous language, 2) overcoming the dominance of the self-founding *ego cogito* in the post-Cartesian philosophical world, and 3) establishing an erotic mode of truth that does not succumb to the post-metaphysical critiques of theory.

1) One of the key problems in the critique of metaphysics, especially as regards metaphysical conceptions of God, is predicatory language about God. Saying something about God applies finite terminology, delimiting God, and seemingly renders God as an object or an idol. This was the primary focus of Marion's *God Without Being*. And naming God has been a much discussed topic in the French phenomenological turn to religion, especially with its interest in negative theology and mysticism. However, for Marion, Augustine avoids this problematic by not saying something *about* God, but in speaking *to* God, in *confessio*. Praise is the mode of language Augustine uses, and "[p]raise speaks a word that predicates nothing of God, but confesses him without end, because, faced with his infinity, *it does not remonstrate with him*" (17). And further:

speaking *to* God, as the confessing praise does, implies first of all turning one's face *to* God so that he can come over me, claim me, and call me starting from himself, well beyond what I could say, predict, or predicate of his starting from myself alone. [...] In an extraordinary rupture with the metaphysical mode of speech as predication of something *about* something, praise no longer pretends to say anything *about* God but signifies precisely that I am saying nothing *about* God, or rather it signifies *to* God that I acknowledge him alone as God, by saying it to him and by acknowledging myself a non-god. (19)

Marion also notes that the words of praise in Augustine do not come from himself, but from scripture, and so Augustine is using God's words as a responsal [*répons*], or invocation of God's response. This avoidance of predicatory and idolatrous language, as might come from the thinking subject alone, is the first of Marion's theses in the book demonstrating Augustine's avoidance of post-metaphysical critique. It is worth noting that this conception of Augustine's speaking to God, indicates for Marion that the *Confessiones* is "not an *auto-* but a *hetero-biography*" (45), since Augustine is not speaking from his own autonomous self, but from a new place '*beside God*'.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine* (2008), trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). Citations indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

2) Another target of the critiques against metaphysics is the stability of the Cartesian subject as self-founding by thinking. So Marion demonstrates in a second thesis that thought, rather than founding the self, actually causes a diremption of the self, whereby thought increasingly becomes aware that it cannot determine the self's own essence in mastery. The self that Marion tries to establish against the sovereign *ego* is that of *l'addonné*—one who is given to be, as opposed to positing one's own self or giving oneself to be, and who receives oneself as a gift but never possess him or herself, as opposed to the solipsistic, stable *ego*. The thinking self, for Augustine, becomes a great question to itself [*factus eram mihi magna quaestio* (conf. IV, 4)]. Thinking opens up a gulf in oneself wherein one learns precisely that one does not have and cannot have access to one's own essence:

in thinking I am put at a distance from myself and become other than I myself, that in thinking, I do not enter into possession of any myself that could exactly and truly say itself in saying I, that the more I think myself (and the more I am by thinking), the more unknowing I become of who I am and alienated from myself. In a word, access to my Being in and through my thought, far from appropriating me to myself as for Descartes, for Saint Augustine exiles me outside myself. (63)

One of the reasons for this is that the thinking self cannot encompass the vastness of the resources into which it can tap. One such resource is *memoria* or memory, and the experience of the 'immemorial'. This is a complicated idea that need not be elaborated here for our purposes, but Marion draws on this to indicate how the mind and the thinking self alone cannot encapsulate the prodigiousness or recalcitrance of this reservoir, nor reign in its dynamism. And so there are always elements of the self that remain beyond the self's ability to think itself. Marion says that for Augustine, "the essence of man, which remains inaccessible to man, resides in the secret of God" (68). This decentred self can only know itself by seeking itself in relationship with God.

3) And this realisation of the decentred, desiring self, sets up what could be seen as the most important thesis of Marion's book, perhaps even of his work to date, which is discussed in Chapter 3, as well as in the lecture that is our focus. In a third thesis, Marion seeks to demonstrate that the desire for the *beata vita*, which is essentially truth, and a life with God, is an indisputable primal urge within all, and that one not only can choose but *must* choose either to love it or to hate it. One either heeds this desire in turning toward God, or one lives a lie about oneself and by the burden of deceit comes to hate this ineluctable truth. Though Marion sees the desire for the *beata vita* as a first principle, it is not founded metaphysically, because it is not founded by the self, or by anything else. So, in this move, Marion has Augustine establish the universal truth of God, and the ultimate human end as the *beata vita*, in a non-metaphysical way.

In order to do this, however, Marion must challenge Heidegger's critique that Augustine's work on the *beata vita* succumbs to post-metaphysical critique. Part of this has to do with Heidegger's claim that Augustine's sense of truth, despite being rooted in desire, still falls under the control of theory. He also argues that Augustine does not think the *beata vita* radically enough, but simply derives it from the Platonic/Aristotelian tradition, so thus remains within that unthinking metaphysical framework, and still sees truth and God as objects to be attained via theory. Marion's response to this is that Augustine's desire-based movement toward truth in the *beata vita* is 'extratheoretical'. He explains this extratheoretical truth as:

a truth that is not exhausted in its theoretic function but can also give itself to desire as much as, indeed infinitely more to, knowledge. To achieve this, the primacy of desire (for the happy life) would have to be founded not on knowledge, that is to say on certain knowledge of a being, but on the primacy of this desire alone—that is to say, on the assurance *without object* yet possessed of desire as such. In other words it would be necessary that the *vita beata* institute itself as truly first principle, that is to say without any previous theoretic condition—without anything to know or make known. (104)

Desire is primary, and one is not seeking a particular object, not even God. "Desire does not have to know its object (not even God as Being or a being) in order to desire in it the *beata vita*" (105). Everyone desires the happy life, even if it seems this is not the case, or even if it leads people away from the happy life toward a kind of contradictory existence. Desire imposes itself on us, unconditionally. Further, desire does not stem from us, but strikes us and possesses us. We need not have prior knowledge of what we desire because it seems we already desire it, and only later come to some knowledge of it by giving ourselves over authentically to that

desire. Though perhaps somewhat problematically stated, Marion claims: “Desire does not here presuppose the knowledge of what it loves but precedes it, and it precedes it because it begets it” (107). Desire for the happy life is thus more primal than any thinking or theoretical understanding that would determine the object sought after as a highest end, and does not depend on any proof of God’s existence. Thus, according to Marion, the truth of the happy life is more primary and exceeds theory.

This sense of truth based on desire, an ‘erotic figure of truth’, causes what Marion calls a ‘dual-action truth’, where one must decide whether one loves or hates the truth. Here he presents the choice between the *veritas lucens*, acceptance of the truth, or the *veritas redarguens*, pretending no to see the truth and so rejecting it. At one level, whether one loves or hates the truth depends upon whether one is able to endure the “ordeal of its excess, at the risk of finding himself affected, modified, altered; or by dodging this excess, at the price of retreat before the evidence, of a retreat far from the true, from the darkling” (109). The truth is like an excess of light that is too much for us, painful for our weak eyes, and impugns our sense of self, or as Marion says, ‘accuses’ us. It is too much for us to bear in its robust luminosity, but also in how it points out our inadequacy. One can try to ignore the accusation, the glaring inadequacy of oneself in this light, trying to hiding from it, and thus hating it, or one can reject the self that stands accused and choose to love the light more than oneself, painful as it may be at first.

In short, to hate the light, it must be loved more than oneself, at least more than the self, whose traits it accuses. If in contrast, I love myself, however deformed, more than the light that accuses me, then I will have to hate it, since it will continue to accuse me, and I will also have to love myself as deformed. And in this way I will end up hating myself as much as I hate the truth. (113)

Expanding upon this, Marion describes four stages of responding to what he calls the ‘evidential excess’ of the truth. This would be what Marion means by the ‘saturated phenomenon’ par excellence. It is not that we cannot know the truth, as many claim, but that it is so evident that it is too much for us to bear. Accordingly, in the first stage one is struck by sorrow and wounded by this excess, rocked by its intensity. This intensity causes one to, in the second stage, recoil, in awareness of the weakness of one’s sick eyes, unable to bear the light. In the third stage, Marion recognises that there is some comfort at first in shielding one’s eyes and returning to the darkness. However, if one remains in this hiding, it constitutes a flight from the truth, and “flight before truth must itself be justified by denying truth its very status as truth” (118). Upholding the lie enabling one to reject the truth, despite the truth’s persistence in evidence, causes one to hate the truth. Thus, one is in the fourth stage confronted with a radical choice: “to either flee it so as to avoid its pain, or confront its pain so as to see it” (118). One must choose and cannot remain indifferent. The choice to not choose, or to suspend choice is to remain in rejection of the truth. Further, this choice impacts who one is and becomes. One either chooses to remain the self that lives a lie about its nature, or one must embrace the path toward becoming a new self. Thus, the choice is not merely theoretical, but primarily practical. One of the more poignant aspects of Marion’s discussion here is that, due to the nature of this primal desire, one wants what the truth provides but only wants it on its own terms, or for its own mastery.

This erotic figure of truth is, for Marion, more robust than a correspondence theory of truth, or even a Heideggerian truth as Being-uncovered (*entdeckend-sein*). In the first, one is a neutral third party who adjudicates the accuracy in correspondence between a concept and an object, and so acts as the metaphysical transcendental subject. In Heidegger, the thing shows itself as it is in itself, but this still requires *Dasein* as the condition of possibility for truth, and does not bring the self into question. These configurations of truth do not do justice to the excess and the saturation of one’s finitude in the encounter with truth, that is too much for one to bear. One can only bear this truth enough to participate in it if one makes the radical and arduous choice to love it. “Neither a predication about things, nor the manifestation of the thing, but the event of an evidence, which shows itself only inasmuch as I tolerate its excess. And I can do so only inasmuch as I love it” (137).

Finally, Marion explores the role of pulchritudo, beauty, in this erotic figure of truth, reflective of Augustine’s famous words from the *Confessiones*: “*Sero te amavi, pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova*”, Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new (X, 27). The lateness is reflective of the shying away from the ordeal of

evidential excess; the love reflective of Augustine's radical choice to love; and beauty as the fuel of desire and in which one participates in the *beata vita*. The advent of beauty overwhelmingly attracts with a magnetic and seductive power. This beauty brings us to our knees in *confessio*, causing us to renounce our old selves and embrace a new vision for a life of beauty with God, who helps us flourish and become more beautiful. Further, this attraction to the beautiful explains how knowing through love, in exuberance, exceeds the knowledge typified in metaphysics. "But if truth must be known, then it is also fitting that the truth can appear in *this* light where love loves and *in the name* of beauty, therefore without a doubt well beyond truth in the theoretic sense of metaphysics" (138).

## Reflections

Above I have tried to provide a hospitable summary of Marion's intentions in his recent work and as punctuated by the lecture being discussed in the symposium. Marion presents an intriguing rehabilitation of Augustine's work in the face of post-metaphysical critiques, and offers fresh insight as to how Augustine might be re-read in a manner sympathetic to Marion's project for a non-metaphysical theology, or even a theology that overcomes metaphysics. My intention here is not to criticise Marion's reading of Augustine, as perhaps some more philological readers of Augustine might, nor to wage a wholesale critique of his work. Instead, I would like to share some, perhaps rather idle, reflections on Marion's talk as they came to me on the particular occasion of his lecture. The tone here, despite however it may seem, is one of profound gratitude for the opportunity to reflect for an afternoon with great thinkers. And on the whole, the informal discussion session at the foot of the masters, so to speak, was valuable beyond any description. My reflections fall under four topics: Marion's previous work and the issue of phenomenality, human agency in his refiguration of the self as well as the refiguration of truth as erotic, boredom in relation to the saturated phenomenon, and finally the issue of trying to overcome metaphysics. Much more could be said about all three of these topics, and thus my intention is simply to spark discussion and further thought, more suggestive than conclusive as these reflections are.

### *Previous work and Phenomenality.*

There are some strong consistencies in Marion's work as a whole that reappear in the current discussion. It is worth noting that one of the issues has been significantly addressed by Marion previously at Villanova, at the Religion and Postmodernism conference. Especially in his 1997 talk, 'In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of "Negative Theology"'. There he discussed the issue of predicatory language and the misunderstandings of 'negative theology' discussed in relation to pseudo-Dionysius, and there are great similarities in how he does so currently in relation to Augustine. Though I will not take this up here, a comparison would surely be worthwhile. Nevertheless, he is rehabilitating Augustine in a similar way as he did with pseudo-Dionysius, demonstrating how each figure does not succumb to the critiques levied at metaphysics. As noted above, Marion is still attempting to challenge the way in which the dominance of the Cartesian subject has rendered it extremely difficult for philosophy to examine revelation. He is also still exploring the possibilities of a theology that does not succumb to Heideggerian critique, particularly that of metaphysics and ontology. Even this striking theme dealt with here in detail of loving or hating the truth is not appearing for the first time. For instance, in the essay 'The Banality of Saturation', we see the following:

Truth is love, [but] in such a way that those who love something else would like it if what they loved were truth, and because they do not like to be deceived, they also do not want to be shown that they are deceived. And so they hate the truth for the sake of whatever it is they love instead of truth. They love the truth insofar as it illuminates [*lucens*], but hate it when it turns its light upon them [*redarguens*].<sup>2</sup>

This is even a more clear and succinct formulation of his position than appears in the current volume expounding this very idea.

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, 'The Banality of Saturation', trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, in *Counter-Experience: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 405.

However, there are some differences of note. It would seem as though the understanding displayed here, of the saturated phenomenon is rather different than in *Being Given*, for instance, where his connectedness to phenomenology, in particular Kantian categories, is much more to the fore. This is understandable, given that there his main interlocutor was Kant, whereas here it is Augustine. However, the saturated phenomenon appears here in a manner rather different to the one which tries to remain connected to phenomenology, in altering the Kantian categories by inversion and saturation. In short, the type of phenomenology put forth here is almost entirely pre-modern, with very few links at all to modern phenomenology. This of course with the exception of the fact that Marion is still trying to outmanoeuvre the modern post-metaphysical critiques.

In some ways this, perhaps momentary, independence from Kant allows for a much more robust account of revelation, and a much better theological discussion, but seemingly at the expense of the philosophical discussion. In *Being Given*, Marion, from my perspective, was able to clear some possibility for God's appearance in philosophical way, but the experience of this still remained very much beholden to the Kantian categories, inverted and/or saturated as they may be. Thus the way is cleared for the theoretical possibility of phenomenology allowing God to appear, but the experience of this, he maintains, must be accounted for in rather Kantian ways, which in my estimation still do not allow Marion to talk of the experience of revelation, as it seems he wishes to do. His project does not quite succeed in that work. He has far more success in describing the experience of God as the saturated phenomenon here, but the philosophical rigour is not present. This does not mean that this more pre-modern, Augustinian phenomenology is not good. In many ways it is better than the modern variety. However, it certainly would seem to alienate a philosophical audience, who would find his current work not only unconvincing, but perhaps even slighting. This marks, as far as I can tell, something of a shift in his previously hospitable relationship to philosophy. Whereas before he sought to work more closely with the philosophical tradition, especially the phenomenological inheritance, here it almost seems he is rather dismissive of this. Some of this is in the spirit of Augustine's lack of distinction between philosophy and theology, and I think being reminded of this is very positive. But the attitude toward philosophy is more dismissive than I think wise. I will return to this point in my discussion of the role of metaphysics. First, I would like to look at the implications of Marion's view of the subject.

#### *Agency and Eros.*

In relation to the above discussion of Marion's previous work, another recurring issue, that might be problematic, is the way in which the subjectivity he seems to espouse is rather weak, lacking in agency. This was a main criticism of the subjectivity presented in *Being Given*, that *l'adonné* was simply too passive. The self presented here, in lieu of the Cartesian self, not only seems to lack agency, but almost any contact with the world at all. Though Marion takes up the issue of the will, it seems that this subject becomes almost a puppet for God (perhaps a 'marionette'). Though there are times when Augustine does present himself as particularly powerless and suppliant, on the whole, Augustine was a *Mensch*, and the subjectivity presented here, at least, is not representative of that. Though it is accurate to reflect the fact that it is only by grace that Augustine has personhood, what is missing is the sense of empowerment that allowed Augustine to be so prolific, grappling head on with some of the most difficult theological issue in history, as well as being such a courageous bishop. Though Marion's subjectivity may not, per se, exclude this possibility, it certainly has not taken steps toward inculcating this aspect of Augustine's life and theology.

Similarly, there is little to no reference to the way in which Augustine teaches how to engage the world. Granted, the concern in Marion's work here is specific to the possibility of a non-metaphysical encounter with God that takes one beyond Cartesian subjectivity. However, we are left in some ways with a subject who is simply there 'beside God'. How does such a subject live in the world? Augustine has much to offer here, especially in terms of how the inner teacher is actually an example in externality of how to engage the world as God intends, and that this is an important part of growing in relationship to God.

One way in which William Desmond's work is helpful on this issue of agency is in his own insights on subjectivity, though it is not possible to elaborate this position here. In short, he does not hold that the subject must experience a total lack of self, though there are times when this can happen. He suggests the idea of a tension between the *contatus essendi*, striving to be, one might say, and the *passio essendi*, the patience of being.

In modernity, the *conatus essendi* seems to go into overdrive, overemphasising autonomous subjectivity. Rather than obliterating this, which would not be possible, or human, he suggests that the *conatus essendi* must be kept in check. This is because the *passio essendi* is prior and more primal. The move is not dissimilar from Marion's in trying to establish a subject that does not give itself to be, but is first given to be. Yet, it allows for a subject that maintains a healthy human agency. The subject is not merely passive, but porous, as in pores that act as an active membrane, selecting what comes in and goes out. The ideal subjectivity, which in many ways is exemplified by Augustine's life, Desmond refers to as the *compassio essendi*, where one is nourished by the empowerment of the agapeic origin, God. This does not exclude or completely contradict Marion's position, but it seems to strengthen it significantly, or perhaps it accomplishes the goal in a better, more robust way.

Further, Desmond does not simply speak of the erotic component but also the agapeic component of the subject. Related to the above discussion of the *conatus essendi* and *passio essendi*, Desmond recalls the dual parentage of Eros in the myth of Diotima. Eros is born of Poros (resource) and Penia (poverty or lack). So even Eros itself in this sense does not proceed from mere lack, but expresses a relation to a resource beyond itself. The *conatus essendi* tends to proceed as though from a sheer sense of lack, striving to obtain that which it lacks. While the *passio essendi* draws on the abundant resource of the agapeic origin and thus proceeds from a sense of fullness and generosity. This is not to say that Marion's approach only proceeds from a sense of lack, but the importance of Desmond's recognition of a primal sense of givenness could compensate for the focus on the erotic alone. The implication of this could be that the self need not make such a drastic leap from the self to Marion's supposedly Augustinian self. Though much more would need to be elaborated on this, I merely suggest that Desmond's Augustinian sense of the self's encounter with God as *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo* (more intimate to me than I am to my own self and greater), which is very significant in his approach, provides a more robust sense of the self in relation to God, and one that is more attuned to both eros and agape in the self that is in relation to God. In short, is truth only erotic, or is it agapeic as well, or perhaps first and foremost?

#### *Boredom and the Saturated Phenomenon.*

Not unrelated to the passivity of the subject that is the screen onto which saturation is projected, are some concerns about speaking of the experience of God in terms of saturation in the contemporary context. A main concern is that contemporary persons are already to a very large degree saturated. In a culture so obviously inundated with images and objects, all appealing at full tilt for one's attention, where cultural stimuli must become even bigger and more bombastic just to be noticed, there is much indicating that people are already saturated by the cultural surroundings. This is often expressed by the all too common feeling of being overwhelmed. Somewhat ironically, however, the expression of boredom, also exceedingly common, though often described in terms of a lack, is perhaps more accurately caused in today's context by being overwhelmed, or saturated. It is remarkable that individuals express boredom often when most overwhelmed with tasks and stimuli. The French word, *ennui*, also common in English, sometimes is expressive of a feeling of annoyance when overwhelmed, but the connotation usually suggests annoyance by something tedious, or something that one dislikes. Similarly, the German word, *Langeweile*, indicates something of enduring tedium that provides a lack of stimulus. So an adequate terminology is not quite available to describe this phenomenon as it is experienced today.

There is a sense in which the boredom experienced in feeling overwhelmed or saturated can lead to a state of torpor, or numbness, because so excessively overstimulated. The sluggishness of torpor can also arise from being overwhelmed, being unable to decide what to do with oneself, and thus expressing boredom, not from a lack but from the dizzying array of stimuli or of demands one faces. Indeed the flux of images in culture today and sheer multiplicity of choices in all things can generate a sense of cultural paralysis. But there is also a sense in which it can fuel a kind of acedia, whereby one can easily opt for unwholesome stimuli in one's demoralised state, or on the other hand it can fuel *pleonexia*, whereby one deals with this numbness by acquisition, whether it be of wealth, power, consumer goods with utopian promises, or other extreme stimuli.

The concern in all of this raises two related questions: 1) despite God being the saturated phenomenon par excellence, how could one experience this saturation if one is already saturated? 2) is this phenomenological

framework of thinking revelation in terms of saturation not too complicit with the contemporary culture of hyper events and spectacle?

In a culture of excess, it is not clear that God is able to command the kind of attention that God's excess demands. As Nietzsche put it, 'God is not to our taste', and this is somewhat more accurate today than the more famous pronouncement that 'God is dead'. There are many other things that are much more attractive than God. In some ways this is surprising; in other ways it is utterly banal. Even for those who give some thought to the idea of God and the implicit ultimacy of God, it is not clear that this ultimacy seems any more urgent, pressing, or appealing than any of the other stimuli that are often made to seem just as ultimate or urgent, if not more so. The cultural situation even seems to distort the notion of ultimacy where, for many life, can seem so devoid of teleology that ultimacy is viewed from a constantly shifting parallax. With this in mind, two possible criticisms of Marion's approach arise.

First, must one not deal with the self's saturation by possibly meaningless excess before adding more excess to it? Marion seems to argue that the truth of God as saturated phenomenon will be apparent to those honest with themselves, and even goes so far as to say that it is not due to a lack of evidence for God, but to an excess of evidence. Yet there is something rather presumptuous in this that does not do justice to the complexity of the contemporary situation, where the ultimacy of God is frequently dismissed. Others have attempted to understand how such a secular age has come to be, and how belief in God has gone from obvious to anything but obvious. Marion's approach, on the other hand, seems to suggest that this is simply because people are lying to themselves. Of course I am oversimplifying his argument, but indeed, for many this is how his position is heard. It very well may be the case that people take little interest in God because such people are living a lie or subject to delusion, but Marion offers no argument in support of this conjecture. There are obviously many intelligent people who would not agree with Marion's view of the truth of God, nor with the accusation that this is because they are lying to themselves and too pusillanimous to face the evidential excess. Marion does not attempt to substantiate this rather presumptuous claim, at least not beyond Augustine's own experience of this being the case.

In order to confront possible predilections or other influences that might be preventing one from taking the question of God and the possibility of God's revelation seriously, William Desmond proposes, among other possibilities, the idea of 'porosity'. He suggests that various factors can cause, metaphorically speaking, one's pores to become clogged, not allowing one to be open to the signs that point to God. He also describes several circumstances that can cause one's pores to become unclogged. The idea of porosity has much to offer in a cultural context when the most ultimate realities, such as truth, goodness, beauty, and even God are often met with blank stares and boredom. Perhaps we must culturally deal with fact that many stimuli that can saturate our pores and dull our sensitivity for signs of the divine in our world. Despite the philosophical absurdity of the situation, the day-to-day reality is that for many, social media, trending YouTube videos, iPads, IMAX 3D, and a vast array of other stimuli, not to mention the pressure to succeed financially and in the job market, are far more compelling than God.

Secondly, there is perhaps some cause for suspicion that Marion is playing into the cultural craving for hyper-events by portraying God's revelation as a saturated phenomenon. It seems as though cultural phenomena must constantly be bigger, more vivid, Hi-Def, louder—in essence, more overwhelming, or more saturating. Is Marion's attempt to describe God as saturating, though presumably in an authentic way, still simply succumbing to a cultural trend? There are several dangers in this. One is that it can increase the tendency toward pursuing religious experience for how it makes one feel or purely as a stimulus, as opposed to for authentic reasons. There is something of this visible in the rise of the mega church, but also in the resurgence of the pre-Vatican II liturgies. There certainly can be some authentic reasons behind the resurgence in popularity of pre-Trentine and Trentine liturgies, but there is also the danger of an ideological quest for false purity, as well as the ideological desire simply to be overwhelmed by an aesthetically beautiful experience. Mystery and beauty are essential to the liturgy, and this has at times been horribly neglected since Vatican II, but there is also something lost in liturgy if it becomes merely an overwhelming aesthetic experience. The other danger is that this experientialism can lead to a kind of fideism, where the reasonableness of belief is simply jettisoned. In this

way, Christianity would succumb to the cultural trend of seeking hyper-experiences, as opposed to challenging this drive and offering more authentic modes of engagement.

### *Metaphysics.*

With regard to metaphysics, I would like to offer a somewhat personal remark, and I do so hesitatingly, but I think the point is a good one, and I am not sure I could explain it another way. Though I have been extensively engaged in the discussion between philosophy and theology, especially as regards critiques of metaphysics and the supposed ‘overcoming of ontotheology’, there is still an unshakeable sense of the strangeness of this discussion for me. This is due to the fact that, by the strangeness of human life, pre-modern thinkers, especially Augustine, interested me early on in my life. And I intend the phrase ‘interested me’ specifically to mean that the works expressing these thinkers’ ideas came to me as an advent. I cannot explain why I was so interested at such a relatively young age of fifteen or so. I spent roughly five years as a student of Augustine, Plato, Socrates, Heraclitus and others, before my first real encounter with modern and contemporary philosophy and the critiques of metaphysics, postmodern thought, etc. In fact it was when I saw Jean-Luc Marion speak at Villanova at Religion and Postmodernism 4, in 2003, as an undergrad that I decided I wanted to engage the space between philosophy and theology in this way. I knew quite decisively. It was the same feeling I had as when I read the Confessions for the first time: that this was the best ‘conversation’ I had ever heard, and how could I possibly not be a part of it. Yet, in immersing myself in this discussion, I have always felt like many of the critiques of metaphysical thinkers were not really talking about the same premodern authors I had encountered. Especially when authors like Augustine refer to ‘being’ or have some sense of an ontology, I have always felt that it meant something very different than what it seemed to mean for critics like Heidegger. This is just a for instance. There are many examples. I had considered these premodern thinkers as metaphysical in a certain sense, but it never meant the same thing as was being criticised by contemporary philosophers, and it seemed very different from the modern version of metaphysics that seems to have taken over as the definition of metaphysics as a whole. Modern metaphysics has always seemed to me a dysfunctional metaphysics, or one that has lost its balance and robustness. So the blanket term ‘metaphysics’ and its critiques has always seemed odd to me.

Seeing with and operating from such a standpoint has never been easy, since it seems so foreign to the commonly held view in the field of fundamental theology and continental philosophy. Rehabilitating so-called ontotheologians so that they can stand up to the scrutiny of deconstructionists can seem like a hopeless task. Yet if one has conviction that much of what these dismissed pre-modern thinkers have said is legitimate, it is difficult to proceed. Not simply out of frustration, this situation has caused me to wonder if it is indeed worthwhile to attempt out-running metaphysics, or out-manoeuving the critiques of metaphysics. In some ways this task seems like a hospitable acquiescence to a rather inhospitable critique, or even misdirected critique. In other ways it can seem as though trying to overcome metaphysics is like trying to jump over one’s shadow. Similarly, is ‘being’ the philosophical obscenity it has been made out to be, or should it simply be used more responsibly—as several key modern thinkers did, Augustine being one of them. (Sometimes I challenge staunch critics of ontotheology to eliminate the verb ‘to be’ in all its forms from their daily language. This is hyperbolic, but there is some truth in the jest.) Much more would have to be explained for this point to take coherent shape, but perhaps the danger is not so much metaphysics, but the kind of *totalisation* to which particular manifestations of have been prone. Admittedly, it is deconstruction that has for many today brought awareness to the dangers of totalisation, and this has presented opportunities for growth in theological understanding. But, my final question would be: despite some apparent outmanoeuvring of metaphysical critiques, is Marion’s position an unnecessarily totalising discourse? My fear is that it seems to be, but this is a point that requires a great deal of discussion. Provocatively, I would like to propose that a properly functioning metaphysics might be the only real guard against totalisation.