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Good without Being? Personhood, Communion, and Evil in Jean-Luc Marion's Theology

From Augustine to Aquinas and beyond, central figures of Christian theology are often understood as advocating an ontological definition of evil, setting evil's utter deprivation or nothingness against God's ipseity as the *summum ens*. "For evil," the *Confessions* read, "is not at all."¹ Denys echoes him: "Evil is not a being."² The *Summa* follows: "all that is [*ens*], insofar as it is so, is [*est*] good."³ The point is clear: substantiality or being are good, and thus predicable of God, while evil is a lack or a deficiency of being. While recent work in the continental philosophy of religion has stigmatized such "ontotheological" readings for various reasons – conceptual idolatry, an importance of "Greek" eudaemonism, and so on – the moral-theological implications of this maneuver remain ambiguous. Here I examine the reasons for this ambiguity, and its possible resolution, from within Jean-Luc Marion's philosophical theology, arguing that while his phenomenological analysis of the person as that which exceeds being initially suspends ontology, his reduction to givenness permits ontology's eventual recovery within a broader horizon of charity. A crucial doubt emerges, however, as we travel this theological arc: does Marion's insistence on the person's phenomenal unrepeatability, despite its liberatory rhetoric, allow any concrete ethical principles to appear? Ultimately, I will claim that it does, but only under particular conditions that foreground the limits and stakes of the "theology without being."

We begin with the concept with which frames the whole of Marion's theological oeuvre from *The Idol and Distance to Givenness and Revelation* – that of the icon. This term, deployed from the beginning as the phenomenological foil to the ontotheological idol of being/Being, is key not only to understanding Marion's doctrines of the saturated phenomenon and of Revelation, but to how these latter two phenomena are intimately interconnected, in his thought, with the ethical encounter with the Other. Indeed, if the early works' "theo-logical" focus sanctions the most extreme reach of Lévinas's axis of alterity, "the Most High,"⁴ at the expense of sidelining the human other, then it is the face of Christ that attempts to rejoin these phenomenally. For Marion,

¹ *Confessiones* VII.13.

² *Divine Names* 716D. Quoted from *Pseudo-Dionysus: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 85.

³ *S. Th.* I.49.1. A more precise rendering would be "all that subsists in presence, insofar as it does so, is good." Note also here the interchangeability between subsistence, goodness, and causity.

⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1969), 34.

witnessing this prototypical icon initiates us into seeing that which surpasses being – namely, the person – which is why understanding *how* God phenomenalizes Himself in the Christ-event is the logical entry point into his project’s ethical dimensions.

What is certain from the get-go is that Christ does not reveal God’s thatness or “existence,” neither from revealed theology’s legitimate perspective nor philosophy’s illegitimate one. The former is easily explainable: God has already revealed Godself to Israel; Christ does not need to “confirm” this revelation, even if he fulfills it. The latter is more complex, stemming as it does from Christian theology’s uncompleted jettisoning of metaphysics, a process modernity “consecrate[s]” as “the primacy of beings as universal object of knowledge.”⁵ For Marion, this problem presents itself quite clearly in the *Summa*, wherein Thomas strives to have sacred doctrine accede to the status of a science he admits that its “object” is ontically inaccessible (through both beings⁶ or Scripture⁷); Thomas’s own definition of science thus relegates theology proper to the beatific vision, disqualifying it from the epistemological field. This aporia is a fork in the road: either accept a non-epistemological definition of revelation, or reduce it to “a piece of information.”⁸ Modernity, Marion claims, opts for the latter, leading to all sorts of philosophical and theological aberrations: the ontotheological idol of the *causa sui*, this idol’s rejection as the rise of atheism, the Heideggerian “theocracy of Being,”⁹ etc., to say nothing of the inane debates, now thankfully declining in the popular imagination, between evolutionary biologists and televangelists over the “existence of God.” But the question of existence also redounds into one of God’s essence, which Christ cannot reveal either on Marion’s account. For the epistemological interpretation of Revelation, by enframing Revelation’s legitimacy within the bounds of transcendental cogitation, must craft an essential *divinitas* capable of “freezing” the noetic gaze. The concept “defines it [*divinitas*, Godhood], and therefore also measures it according to the dimension of its hold. Thus the concept...can take up again the essential [!] characteristics of the ‘aesthetic’ idol.”¹⁰ The critique of philosophy we read in *The Erotic Phenomenon*, that “philosophy...considers first and last the question of being or not being, or” (a second question) “the question that asks what beings are, which is to say, what οὐσία is,” thus maps onto the

⁵ J.-L. Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen Lewis (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 3.

⁶ J.-L. Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, trans. Stephen Lewis (Oxon.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 13.

⁷ *Id.*, 17-18.

⁸ *Id.*, 22.

⁹ J.-L. Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), 35.

¹⁰ *Id.*, 29.

existence-essence distinction Revelation must bypass. Why? Because “within this horizon, the quest to know if I am loved or if I love receives only secondary attention.”¹¹ Yet as magisterial authority itself teaches – Marion cites *Dei Verbum* – “the goal of Revelation is not to grant us the knowledge of something else, or even a growth in our knowing... God has a design that is otherwise radical... [His] intention is not so much to make himself known as to be to *re-cognized*, to communicate himself, to enable [human beings] to enter into a communication that puts them into communion with him”¹² – commun(icat)ion.

So if Christ, the icon *par excellence*, reveals neither God’s essence nor existence, i.e. God’s being, then what does He reveal? Nothing – understood properly – no-thing, and not only because “the *Logos*, even and above all when it manifests itself, manifests itself precisely as a man, not as an object”¹³ but because “the believer, in looking at his face *as it should be looked at*, not only sees Jesus, the son of the carpenter of Nazareth” – “man” – “but also the Christ *as the Son*, and thus, finally, the Son *as the Father*.”¹⁴ The icon’s no-thing-ness puts not an intuitive vacuum or radical absence into play but a phenomenal *différance* wherein “the visible [does] not cease to refer back to an other than itself, without, however, that other ever being reproduced in the visible.”¹⁵ The icon’s hyper-visibility, which Marion formalizes as the saturated phenomenon,¹⁶ manifests a relationality so complete that it overcomes even the most canonical of ontic limitations, the principle of non-contradiction, in order to grace visibility with the paradox. “The visibility of the icon is distinguished by a remarkable property: it bears...*first of all*, on another”; thus, “They” – the Father and the Son – “are *both* one and two.”¹⁷ Indeed, “Jesus shows himself all the more as who he is (*the Son* of the Father) the more he refers to the one who he is not (*the Son of the Father*)”; for Marion, this “perfect *inauthenticity*” or kenosis of subjectivity accomplishes the icon. Emptying himself of all identity save Sonship, he “take[s] the point of view of God in order to manifest it.”¹⁸ To quote *God without Being*’s analysis of the icon, “the icon lays out” – not here in “the material of wood and paint” but in an enfleshed human face – “the intention of a transpiercing

¹¹ Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 5.

¹² Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, 27.

¹³ *Id.*, 47.

¹⁴ *Id.*, 103.

¹⁵ Marion, *God without Being*, 18.

¹⁶ See J.-L. Marion, *Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), 199 ff.

¹⁷ Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, 102.

¹⁸ *Id.*, 85.

gaze emanating from [it].” This face is the one that says “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9) because seeing it means, in the witness’s movement “into the eyes of the icon,” seeing herself as she is seen by the Father, seeing herself envisaged. Marion names this “One” who sees: “the reference from the perceived visible to the invisible *person* summons” (us).¹⁹ The facing page confirms it: “the conciliar definition...confirming the theological status of the icon, bases the icon on ὑπόστασις.” This term, “which the Latin Fathers translate by *persona*, does not imply...substantial presence.”²⁰ Thus, as early as *God without Being*, Marion changes the pronoun of the original question and so answers it: not what, but *who*, does Christ reveal? No thing, no concept, no *ens*, but only a certain and specific Person: the Father. Made visible as and in an iconic “sign of contradiction”²¹ (Lk. 2:34-35), it is *person*, ὑπόστασις, that names that which is otherwise than being.

Central to this interpretation, however, is that the anamorphosis that allows the witness to access Christ’s personality is accomplished miraculously by the Holy Spirit. For unlike Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*, which *Being Given* uses to explain the idea of anamorphosis, seeing Christ as the Father’s icon does not just require the gaze to move to a different, perhaps uncomfortable or unconventional, physical space.²² Rather, “anamorphosis [here] reaches its ultimate point... The gaze that comes upon me provides...no immediately assignable intuition,” for “it resides precisely in the black holes of the two pupils, in the sole and miniscule space where, on the surface of the body of the Other, there is nothing to see.”²³ To take its perspective would be to exceed the limits of three-dimensional space, “to travel through the invisible mirror”²⁴ into the icon’s interior. “This crossing...prove[s] to be so radical that no man could, of himself, carry them out” thus, “[we] have to accept that only God can grant...the accomplishment of the anamorphosis leading from man’s point of view all the way to the point of view of God.”²⁵ This is Marion’s pneumatology: the Spirit, through grace, “eniconizes” the face of Christ for the witness, granting

¹⁹ Marion, *God without Being*, 19.

²⁰ *Id.*, 18.

²¹ Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, 52.

²² Marion, *Being Given*, 124.

²³ *Id.*, 232.

²⁴ Marion, *God without Being*, 19.

²⁵ Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, 83

her the hyperontic perspective from which the Father appears in the Son.²⁶ Like “ethics,” faith, too, “is an optics.”²⁷

This new sight is not solipsistic, but always already a kind of communion, and not only because Revelation, like all other “events,” creates a hermeneutic community around itself.²⁸ Christ’s eniconization is moreover an initiation into the Trinitarian drama itself, wherein “unity...at issue...cannot be told according to number (unicity, plurality)... [but as] the unity of a union, of an [*sic*] union as communion; that is to say, according to love (charity).”²⁹ This communion is neither absorption nor spectacle; we do not “approach the economic Trinity from an immanent point of view”³⁰ or just watch the Father and Son commune while not getting involved ourselves. Instead, because the icon “sees *out*,” so to speak, it sees and implicates us, casting us in the Father’s gaze. John’s First Letter marks the crucial link: “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another” (1 Jn. 4:11) – the author, not coincidentally identified with the “beloved disciple” (ὁ μαθητῆς ὃν ἠγάπα, Jn. 21:7), addresses his readers with the plural, Ἀγαπητοί, of the same name (ὁ ἀγαπητός) Jesus receives on Mount Tabor.³¹ Named with the Son’s name, we are besought (*interloqué*), and can only answer, hesitatingly, like the disciple in Caravaggio’s *Calling of St. Matthew*: “Me?”³² In other words, the name *denominates* us, rendering us in the accusative (no longer the nominative “I,” *ego*, but a “me”) while nominating us “Beloved.”³³ And how else to interpret this name but as erasing, literally, the distance between “be(ing)” and “loved,” as asking us to be only insofar as loved? This would mean, of course, nothing less than assuming Christ’s own iconic status beyond being as ὑπόστασις – as person. Yet here I suggest that this is, for Marion, Revelation’s exact stakes: risking Christ’s gaze risks becoming *personal*, becoming – to use a helpful term from John Zizioulas – “enhypositized.”³⁴

²⁶ *Id.* 106. “The Spirit imposes himself as a phenomenal way of access to the iconic vision of the Father in the Son as Jesus the Christ, functioning as the director of the Trinitarian uncovering of God, the only economy of theology.”

²⁷ Lévinas, 29.

²⁸ Marion, *Being Given*, 228-229.

²⁹ Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, 100-101.

³⁰ *Id.*, 101.

³¹ See Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, 48-51.

³² See Marion, *Being Given*, 283 ff.

³³ See J.-L. Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2002), 139 ff.

³⁴ John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 109.

Like a kind of universal icon, the Father's sight shine forth from Christ to envision as Beloved the entire phenomenal field. His sight "changes everything" (Bergoglio), bathing all phenomena in an ever-new erotic light that casts them as unique loci of divine love.³⁵ A phenomenology of charity should insist on that penultimate qualifier, "unique," so as not to decay into an old ontology, such as that of the transposable transcendentals, with "love" just serving as a less scandalous catchphrase for "being." That Zizioulas yields to this temptation when he writes of an "ontology of love as replacing the ontology of οὐσία"³⁶ should not obscure his otherwise decisive analysis of what distinguishes personhood from subsisting being:

Love is a *relationship*; it is the free coming out of one's self [*ekstasis*], the breaking of one's will, a *free* submission to the will of another. It is the other and our relationship with [them] that gives us our identity, our otherness, making us 'who we are,' that is, persons; for by being an inseparable part of a relationship that matters [most fundamentally] we emerge as *unique* and *irreplaceable*... It is in this that the 'reason,' the *logos* of our being lies: in the relationship of love that makes us unique and irreplaceable *for another*.³⁷

Ultimately, the Father's enhypostasizing gaze does indeed extend to all beings, calling Creation in an eschatological theosis from beingness to personhood. Yet there remains, in the meantime – *in via* – a preeminent space where ὑπόστασις "happens": interpersonal human communion. To see the face of the Other as an "icon of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) as well, which stems not just from Christ but from Adam's original destiny (ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν—*let us make the human being as our icon*, Gen. 1:26 LXX), is for Marion a coequal aspect of experiencing the Spirit's eniconizing pull. Following the logic of 1 Jn. 4:20,³⁸ he calls "this...the *here and now* of Revelation, the instant ceaselessly proposed anew, in which we are able to see whether and to what extent we are becoming disciples of Christ." He clarifies: "have we helped our neighbor,

³⁵ Marion provides a poetic description of this in *God without Being*, 137; "Love strikes the world with vanity in all indifference to its virtues – it is an extrinsic vanity; in the same way, it touches certain beings with a grace just as extrinsic, according to which it associates with its incommensurable action the most trivial of beings: the cobblestone one passes, a child's sleigh, an invented proper name, the being matters little, provided that it stem from a love."

³⁶ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 108. That this statement is oxymoronic to an almost stupefying degree – could we ever speak, for example, of a "biology without *bios*" or an "anthropology without *anthropos*"? – should does not reflect on Zizioulas's theological acumen but on the degree to which the prestige of the "ontological" still permits it to be deployed as a synonym for "most important" or "most fundamental." Hence contemporary theologians' tendency to relapse into the *analogia entis* whenever faced with a genuine breakthrough: Tillich's "ground of Being," Ratzinger's "act as being," Wojtyła's "personal being" – this list could go on.

³⁷ *Id.*, 167. I have replaced "ontologically" with "most fundamentally," in keeping with my critique in n. 42, above.

³⁸ "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

given even from our surplus, loved the least among us? This is the only criteria, the only crisis, the only test,”³⁹ and, moreover, no easy sentimentalism, for when “the face really becomes the phenomenon of a human being [and] makes a person appear who is essentially defined as the crux and the origin of his or her relationships,”⁴⁰ the “pearl of inestimable price” (Matt. 13:45-46) before us brackets our practical concerns and the calculus of the “natural attitude.” Exceptions must not only be made, but, when dealing with persons, with unique others, there are only exceptions; what *Being Given* describes as the philosophical consequence of givenness’s excess over being – “the exception becomes the rule”⁴¹ – reasserts itself in Marion’s moral theology as a kind of “ὕποστασις of the ethical act.” The (inter)personal encounter forces a decision to love (or not), but this decision is always unenscribable; its description eludes us because it suspends categoriality. For “if the existence of a certain being has as its ultimate goal either its self or its nature or anything general, such as ideas or ideals or moral principles, its particularity cannot be true.”⁴² Ethics must then be interpreted precisely (against Kant) as the suspension of universal imperatives in favor of the concrete one before me, whose needs, wants, desires, or demands are totally particular and must be dealt with in a space between us that excludes the ontological field in all its modalities – cultural, social, political, etc.⁴³ This “cleaving off” from Lévinasian totality inaugurates communion because for that moment – for the hypostatic moment of the ethical act – person exceeds being. In that moment, humans are *imago Trinitatis*.

In making this claim, however, Marion’s moral theology opens itself to a serious contradiction: ethical apophaticism. He never states this openly, although Zizioulas, following a very similar line of thinking, does: “if this principle [the hypostatic principle] were to be translated into morality, into a code of behavior, it would mean that any ethics based on natural law or the

³⁹ J.-L. Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2002), 154-155.

⁴⁰ J.-L. Marion, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner et al. (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2008), 74.

⁴¹ Marion, *Being Given*, 156.

⁴² Zizioulas, 68.

⁴³ It is precisely this lesson that the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches, despite its frequent misinterpretation as advocating some kind of interethnic solidarity. While the latter is certainly an unavoidable logical consequence of the parable, what the Samaritan personifies first and foremost is the *suspension* of the ontic facticity of Jew/Samaritan in recognition of the need of the other as a *particular* person who is not a member of a group. The scribes’ answer to Jesus’s question, “Who was neighbor to him?” – “The one who showed him mercy” – shows the interpersonal character of that encounter. What is so profoundly baleful about every ethnocentrism (indeed, every ideology) is that it deliberately erects categorial roadblocks to impede the encounter. As Marion says (*Prolegomena to Charity*, 163), “the extermination of the Jews and others rested expressly upon the denial of their status as flesh, or worse, upon the irrelevance of this very flesh to assure their status as other persons.” Lévinas’s dedication in *Otherwise than Being* (“antisemitism” as “the same hatred of the other man”) says the same.

idea of justice or the ‘rights of the individual’ would become unacceptable.”⁴⁴ The *Prolegomena to Charity* comes close to stating the problem: “here, [in the Gospel,] the love of neighbor no longer has anything natural, normal or spontaneous about it: to love others is commanded, and obedience here does not go without saying, precisely because it is being commanded.”⁴⁵ But *how* could love ever be commanded? Zizioulas presses this: “there is no ethic of otherness...that would not lead to the Cross. But can the Cross be morally prescribed?”⁴⁶

To be clear: this question is not just about having a “society” where the natural attitude reigns and “community” is bracketed, but also about the phenomenology of love itself. Marion admits, “no lover claims seriously or easily to love the other purely, beyond his or her conviction of having loved to love in view of *this* other: he would like to love, but he never succeeds in proving it.”⁴⁷ This eschatology of love, as much as it confirms personhood’s non-ontological and non-epistemological status, leaves the definition of “the good” ambiguous. For if goodness was to be defined, i.e. objectified as a noetic intention, would that not exemplify a “pretension to absolute knowledge... belong[ing] to the domain of the idol”⁴⁸? How could goodness maintain its prestige as *maxime proprie nominate Deum*, especially over and against *ens*,⁴⁹ if it, too, became inscribed within the horizon of efficient causality as a guaranteed best practice? To read one more text: “the injunction of obligation toward the other leads, in reality, to the neutralization of the other as such. The other is neutralized as other, for another can always be substituted who can offer the face of the other that the universal moral law requires.”⁵⁰ This passage stigmatizes not just the categorical imperative but any notion of goodness built on non-particular applicability, *even* – and this is the real problem – the notion of interpersonal encounter itself. Were this to be the case, phenomenology would legitimate a *laissez-faire* ethical universe where its own summons to allow the person to appear would itself be rendered optional. In its most perverse form, this interpretation might even claim that certain ethical situations demand objectifying the other in a way that – given those instances’ intrinsic unrepeatability – does not need to be explained or communicated. Not only would evil thus be able to enter the play of persons wearing the mask of mercy, but so too

⁴⁴ Zizioulas, 68.

⁴⁵ Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 167, discussing Jn. 13:34.

⁴⁶ Zizioulas, 68.

⁴⁷ Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 93.

⁴⁸ Marion, *God without Being*, 23.

⁴⁹ *Id.*, 76.

⁵⁰ Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 93.

could *any* system of universal morality reassert itself as phenomenologically necessary for some specific place, time, culture, historical moment, etc. In other words, the good suspends the universal in favor of the particular only to admit that the universal is particularly good.

Such a ‘libertarian’ interpretation of phenomenology is not too uncommon; it’s often heard, for example, in the view that problematizing the *analogia entis* demands philosophical atheism. Without pretending to be able to address phenomenology as a whole here, I do now want to suggest that this interpretation, applied specifically to Marion, misreads his use of the ἐποχή as a destruction of the ontological field rather than as its (ontology’s) re-situation within a larger horizon. *Being Given* insists, repeatedly, on this latter point. “My entire project,” writes Marion, “aims to think the common-law phenomenon” – beingness – “and through it the poor phenomenon” – objectivity – “on the basis of the paradigm of the saturated phenomenon, of which the former two offer only weakened variants, and from there derive by progressive extenuation.”⁵¹ The third reduction, the maneuver which aims to “restore to [love] the dignity of a concept,”⁵² does not therefore lord like some universal tribunal over all phenomena, segregating the sheep (person, Gød, charity) from the goats (objects, mere beings, concepts) so as to damn the latter to philosophical ignominy. Rather, by framing the latter as cadets of the former, the ἐποχή establishes a horizon of gratuity in which both can appear. Marion asks us to overturn the old binaries – nature/grace, history/eschaton, being/Creation, unity/Trinity, Law/Spirit – in order to think these pairs’ first terms as moments of the second or, better, as icons of the second. Indeed, *God without Being* itself mentions the conceptual icon. “It is not a question of using a concept to determine an essence but of using it to determine an intention – that of the invisible advancing into the visible and inscribing itself therein by the very reference it imposes from this visible to the invisible.”⁵³ A key clarification follows later: “goodness” is not just one conceptual icon among others but is the concept that names divine intentionality itself. “The ultimate nomination recedes from Being to goodness, whose denomination opens a properly unconditioned field to the Requisite... In this way the precedence of Being over beings itself refers to the precedence of the gift over Being, hence finally of the one who delivers the gift over Being.”⁵⁴ The “given,” no longer just the fact’s neutral thrownness, now names personal origination. “It” (i.e. whatever) is good because its

⁵¹ Marion, *Being Given*, 227.

⁵² *Id.*, 324; but see also 26, 31, 112, 120, and 269.

⁵³ Marion, *God without Being*, 23.

⁵⁴ *Id.*, 75.

facticity is interpreted as given, not just by “the world” or “Being” – such infinite expanses can have no meaning for us – but by a certain and specific person: the Father.

From a moral-theological perspective, then, we see that Marion’s reduction to givenness leaves room for the injunction’s legitimate ethical role, but only within the logic of the gift. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15); relationship is the basis of the law. To go any further and examine which *specific* body of law this theology authorizes is far beyond the scope of this analysis, and not only because of Marion’s supreme reluctance to actually suggest one.⁵⁵ It is clear, though, that practicing a hermeneutic of gratuity is a baseline condition for goodness. “*L’adonné*,” he writes in *In Excess*, “is...characterized by reception. Reception implies, indeed, passive receptivity, but it also demands [!] active capacity, because capacity (*capacitas*), in order to increase to the measure of the given and to make sure it happens, must be put to work.”⁵⁶ The phenomenology of charity, like all phenomenologies, is thus not only a “work,”⁵⁷ but *the* work that claims for itself the role of explicitly conceptualizing the fundamental givenness of all subjectivity, and thus of overcoming the subject in favor of what Marion calls the “besought” (*interloqué*) and what I have interpreted as the person (ὕπόστασις). But have we not thus returned full circle to our discussion of anamorphosis and the hypostatic moment, both already (pre)determined as a grace? Yes, but with a crucial caveat: the third reduction draws no line in the sand between grace and nature, insofar as the latter, too, is given by God’s hyperessential goodness in the act of Creation. Nature – including human nature – is itself a grace, perhaps even a first grace; that “the work” might achieve charity, or at least assent to it, is thus perfectly logical. What *would* be illogical, from Marion’s view, would be any attempt to think ethics without gratuity and so consign moral theology to the same epistemological contradictions that befall purely “rational” or “natural” theologies.

This having been said, we are now, at last, in a position to answer our opening question: when God’s goodness exceeds being, does any ethical principle appear as such? Yes, because even

⁵⁵ The only consistent exception to this is Lévinas’s idea that the face says, “You shall not kill (me),” a precept which Marion adopts and repeats without noticeable reservation in numerous discussions about the (human) face as icon. I would caution against reading into these moments a literal advocacy for the Mosaic Law (in any of its historical interpretations), however, especially if we wish to maintain a methodological distance between a given scholar’s personal religious convictions, however well-known those might be, and the stances their texts point to in and of themselves.

⁵⁶ Marion, *In Excess*, 48.

⁵⁷ J.-L. Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1998), 58 and 70.

though the good appears as a being in the non-particular injunction, this being, insofar as it is a *given* being, is justified by the relationality that gives it. Zizioulas calls this the “Eucharistic ethos”: namely, that “whatever exists or happens is *given* to us by a *person*... Faith,” he continues, “does not spring from a rational conviction or from a psychological experience, but from the ethos of attributing everything to a personal cause.”⁵⁸ The takeaway here is not that being must be shunned, as if it could exist as alterity’s enemy, but that, alone, being counts for nothing. An interesting crossing: person, which is properly *no-thing*, justifies, while thingly being appears “*as if* it were not...under the indifference of boredom’s gaze.”⁵⁹ Without the “the primacy of relation over substantiality,”⁶⁰ being is meaningless, even (or especially) when capitalized in moves of ontocratic pretension. For Marion, then, nothing receives the name “evil” except being-for-itself, an entity’s complete self-enclosure in autarchic isolation.⁶¹ Thus, it is the *how* of being that matters ethically. As Zizioulas says, “man is free to affect the *how* of his existence either in the direction of the way (the *how*) God is, or in the direction of what his, that is, man’s nature is.”⁶² But if the latter, nature, includes the *capacitas* for receiving givenness, then this vortex of pronouns is really about deciding between two definitions of “nature,” a duel of equivocal “beings.” Does being, in our most fundamental understanding, refer to the other, to “distance,” to relation – or does it refer to itself? A choice for either one may produce certain precepts or norms that align the ethical act with the chosen option’s principles; to think God as person might not necessarily lead to ethical apophaticism. What it does do, however, is place ethics solely in the site of another’s love – and in this view, this means God’s love. That this conclusion itself produces further hermeneutical hurdles – such as the question of who legitimately interprets Revelation – is perhaps unsatisfying for those seeking firmer moral-theological guidance. That Marion himself would counter that the person’s saturated phenomenality *must* initiate this “infinite hermeneutic” should not be our final word. Instead, we should ask again, and more: can moral theology afford this possibility? Can it afford history?

⁵⁸ Zizioulas, 98.

⁵⁹ Marion, *God without Being*, 119.

⁶⁰ Marion, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 74.

⁶¹ Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, 19 and 26.

⁶² Zizioulas, 165.