
*The Visible and the Revealed* is a collection of eight previously published essays by Jean-Luc Marion. It is a translation of *Le visible et le révélé* (with the exception of chapters 5 and 8, which have been added for the English version) published by Les Éditions du Cerf, in 2005. Chapters 1 and 8 have not previously appeared in English.

The collection shows the evolution of the concept for which Marion is most well known: the *saturated phenomenon*. It also includes his influential essay on *the gift*, as well as essays on the discourse of love and on the link between faith and reason. Labeled by some as a “postmodern theologian,” and a self-described “historian of philosophy,” Marion has become an important figure in contemporary philosophy of religion and this book is a relevant and noteworthy contribution to the field; it is of interest for supporters and critics of Marion alike, perhaps the latter even more so, as he seeks to defend his theories against objections.

The three-fold purpose of publishing this book of essays is outlined in a preface by the author, which also works well to introduce the major themes of Marion’s thought for those not familiar with it. That said, as a first encounter with Marion this book would be quite challenging without a basic knowledge of Western metaphysics and a certain level of fluency in the language of phenomenology. For one, the book is a contribution to the on-going discussion taking place at the intersection of Christianity and philosophy (ix-x). The collection is also a response to the questions, comments and criticisms that have emerged out of what Marion admits is an unexpectedly large readership. He feels that in many cases people are responding “not only to [his] fully constructed books but also to articles that [he] had considered mere outlines or rough drafts, forgotten as soon as published” (x). Finally and most importantly, the book represents Marion’s effort to describe metaphysics from a “metaphysically neutral” ground, i.e., phenomenology (xi). It is an investigation and interrogation of what precisely can be included in the field of phenomenology. More specifically, he asks if phenomenology can include phenomena of revelation. If so, phenomenology itself might be fulfilled, as well as the rights of
theology liberated (xii). In other words, Marion wants to legitimize theology in the name of philosophy by broadening the scope of phenomenology, the latter being a goal in and of itself.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce and elaborate Marion’s concept of the saturated phenomenon, which he arrives at by problematizing Kant’s definition of the phenomenon as well as that of Husserl (45), arguing that they limit what appears and is experienced as phenomena. Marion theorizes the saturated phenomenon as an “unconditioned and irreducible phenomenon, with neither delimiting horizon nor constituting I” (25), and as such it surpasses (by opening up) both the metaphysical and phenomenological conceptions of phenomena. In other words, the saturated phenomenon demonstrates “the possibility of the impossible” within phenomenology (45), which is precisely where Marion locates revelation. By “freeing” the possibility of revelation in this way, Marion posits the possibility of a phenomenology of religion (47-8).

Chapter 7 is probably the most articulate and comprehensible essay on the saturated phenomenon; it is also the most recent. In “The Banality of Saturation”, Marion explains that saturated phenomena are more variable and more frequent than previously understood: “not only possible but inevitable” (132-3). Ultimately, he argues here that not taking saturated phenomena into account is irresponsible, as it would effectively disregard the very common experience of “nonobjectifiable, nonbeing phenomena,” seen for example in the event, the work of art, the flesh, and the face of the other. Rather than being its only occurrence, “the phenomenon of revelation” is simply a radicalized mode of saturation (121).

While they are somewhat repetitive, the inclusion of all three chapters on saturated phenomena in one volume will be useful for some readers because one sees first-hand the development of the concept across a 16-year span, from its inception in 1988 (chapter 1) to the popular 1996 essay (chapter 2 – still commonly referenced despite being out-of-date, according to Marion), and finally chapter 7, from 2004, in which Marion defends the legitimacy of the saturated phenomenon as a phenomenological concept, while also expanding on it.

In chapters 5 and 6, Marion takes up and reworks two themes relevant to the philosophy of religion discussed by Derrida: the gift and love, respectively. These essays take some distance
from pure metaphysical theory (though they are still theoretical) and some readers will thus find them more accessible. In chapter 5, for example, Marion elaborates Derrida’s metaphysical analysis of the gift and reconceptualizes it in phenomenological terms. He wants to “renounce the economic horizon of exchange in order to interpret the gift from the horizon of givenness itself” (88). He reduces the gift to itself, to pure givenness, and suggests that because the particular phenomenon of revelation accomplishes “most radically this emergence from self and not from a cause” (100), revelation thus appears as a gift. This chapter is skillfully constructed and one could feasibly warrant the purchase of this book for this essay alone.

The essays selected work well as a collection. The fact that they are presented in chronological order means that each one builds conceptually to some extent on the previous one, and each essay contributes to the comprehension of the next (with the exception perhaps of chapter 4, the usefulness of which even Marion questions). Another feature is that all translations were done by the author, which helps with the integrity of the message. Ultimately, this collection of Marion’s thought is most useful when understood as part of a larger, continually unfolding project to examine the (antagonistic as much as mutually reinforcing) moments in the relationship between phenomenology and theology.

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