

# COGNITION OF THE SATURATED: CASE OF FACE PHENOMENON

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## Abstract

The question of a «subject» appears in a new way in the context of a «third type» of phenomenon, introduced explicitly by a French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. His idea of saturated phenomenon opens a discussion about the possibility and way of cognition with regard to the saturated phenomenon as well as the one who manages to receive it – the givee. I chose to approach this question through the aspect of cognition, since it is so radically transformed in this perspective, which can be called as phenomenology of givenness. First I shortly introduce the scene of action by sketching the concept of the saturated phenomenon and its incompatibility with the traditional concept of cognition (or knowledge). Then the problem of cognition in the context of saturated phenomenon is addressed by a double analysis: that of the recipient of such givenness and a particular case of the saturated phenomenon – the face as icon. Ways in which the encounter with the saturated phenomenon retains the right to be called cognition are explicated, as well as the way in which it is incompatible with conceptual knowledge. The role and status of the one who knows, i. e. transformation from «subject» to the givee, is also discussed.

**Keywords:** saturated phenomenon, icon, «subject», cognition, face, other, *adonné*.

## Constitution, Adequation, Knowledge

Traditionally the subject is considered to be the beginning of any phenomenon. Either the metaphysical ego, finding himself/herself untouchable by the doubt, or the phenomenological ego of constitution, it is the starting point (as well as the endpoint) of any experience and knowledge in that he/she produces conditions for any phenomenon that appears to it (Descartes, Husserl, Kant). The object gives itself to the *ego* as perception, which is *a priori* organized according to him/her and recognized as a particular object.<sup>2</sup> Therefore experience is reduced to the *I* (a phenomenon is constituted by the *I* (or *ego*). This experience between the object and the ego is traditionally called a phenomenon (what appears). This conception of the phenomenon is compatible with the con-

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<sup>2</sup> MacGregor L. The Role of the Ego in Religious Experience. In: *Aporia*, Provo: Brigham Young University, 2002, vol. 12.2.

cept of knowledge which supposes the primacy of the one who knows. Not only scientific knowledge, but also daily knowledge and experience of the world in natural attitude is based on the same model as presented in philosophical traditions: that of evidence in adequation between intellect and the thing (in metaphysics) or between the intention and intuition, perception and the perceived (in phenomenology).<sup>3</sup> Concept of adequation is crucial here: it happens when the object is given (in intuition) and is given as it is thought and conceptualized (so as to be equal to intention).<sup>4</sup> This adequation, without questioning here if it is possible in reality, is thought to be a sole firm source of evidence and reliable knowledge – if not the only knowledge.

### Saturated Phenomenon

While Marion accepts such a model by starting from analysis of correlation between what is intended and what gives itself, he observes that situation of adequation includes only part of all phenomena. That is, he classifies it as poor and common phenomena. Such phenomena which give minimum intuition and are capable of fulfilling the intention allow adequation easily. These are objects of formal logic and mathematical idealities. Next, there are common phenomena, which still give poor intuition and constitution is possible. Lack of intuition allows «comprehension, foresight and reproduction»<sup>5</sup>. These two types of phenomena are subject to knowledge, they can be known in a usual sense of the word, i. e. conceptually. Another way to call it is objective knowledge. One clearly sees, we may say.<sup>6</sup> All scientific knowledge works only with such phenomena, going further ahead with technologies, widening the reach of the arm and the horizon of the eye by telescopes and microscopes. Despite this ever increasing advance and «going further», it is rather going farther with respect to knowledge of the third type of phenomena. According to Marion, if some phenomena are lacking in intuition, some of them give a surplus of it. That is, such a phenomenon cannot be constituted by the *I* and reduced to it alone, since it exceeds his understanding.<sup>7</sup> According to Marion, givenness is the only instance to which a phenomenon must be reduced, not the *I*. The phenomenon gives itself, or its *self*, and is not bounded by the limits of the *I* and of its conditions of experience. Seeing it as such, phenomenon itself decides how to show itself and it can give itself without any measure. There-

<sup>3</sup> Marion J.-L. The Saturated Phenomenon. In: D. Janicaud et al. *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": the French Debate*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2000, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Marion, op. cit., 215.

<sup>6</sup> Latin *ob-jacere* – to throw in front of [me]. Distance of the object in front of me provides good visibility, i. e. knowledge, understanding.

<sup>7</sup> Remembering the analogy to vision, it can be compared to the situation where the object is not an object anymore, i. e. not in front of me, but it throws itself on me, weighing me. Thus it *is* a phenomenon to me, giving its impact, although without letting to see it clearly.

fore, adequation between what gives itself and what is perceived is not achieved. It is so not because of lack of «material» which is not enough (for knowing), but due to excess of it (hence – saturated phenomenon). In the situation described a question must be raised: should we claim that such a phenomenon, by logic, has nothing to do with cognition, according to the principle – no adequation (evidence), no cognition? If this were the case, in what way one could re-cognize such a phenomenon?

In an attempt to picture the way in which the third type of the phenomena are «known», or rather, cognized or at least recognized, it is necessary to ask about the «subject». While the «subject» of a poor phenomenon sees clearly the object or the being which is constituted by him, the receiver of a saturated phenomenon is blinded by it, unable to constitute, i. e. to look at it. Indeed his situation is similar to that of the prisoner of the platonic cave, dragged outside in the sun: the surplus of light makes him blind.<sup>8</sup> In this case, blindness is a lack of concept (understanding). Hence it is not possible to call it knowledge as knowledge of objects, which gives theories, univocal descriptions, explanations and especially reasons. On the other hand, if cognition is considered as not only knowing objects (better and more), but also as knowing other ways of knowing through encountering non-objects, in other words, discovering something new in the world one is living in, should not it be called fundamental blindness to not have been blinded? If expanding knowledge by constituting objects indeed allows one to declare perfect vision in the world of objects and beings, it at the same time results in total blindness with respect to the saturated. The supposition of alternative of «visions» is the outcome of incapability to have more than one intentionality at a time. One intentionality gives knowledge of common phenomena (objects) and the other gives cognition of saturated phenomena. Blindness in one of them results in vision of another kind and vice versa. This is something Marion (and Plato in another set of pictures) tries to show. Marion uses an important insight, that every phenomenon, even the simplest object, requires a certain gaze, proper to it. An object appears when the only proper intention is directed at it, which assigns the most suitable meaning. Any other gaze will not let it appear as such. In painting such a requirement related to perspective is called anamorphosis. Simply speaking, this principle says that one must adapt the gaze in order to see a phenomenon. One can choose object intentionality or one that transforms it into aesthetic, ethic (Levinas) or other visibility. At this point it will be agreed that only one intentionality is possible at a time. Therefore, to ask about the saturated phenomenon and its cognition means to ask about a gaze proper to it – i. e. about the «subject». What is its role? How should one aim for such a phenomenon, if one cannot produce it by constitution? How to search for it? What should be done and thought in order to accede to it? These questions are directed to practice (doing) as much as to theory (thinking).

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<sup>8</sup> Marion, *op. cit.*, 201.

## Adonné

### *Receiving itself*

One indeed cannot search for it and achieve it, since one does not *know* what to search for.<sup>9</sup> At issue is not understanding or knowledge (since it is not provided), but accepting and receiving the phenomenon. Hence what comes after the «subject» is called *adonné* (the givee, or the gifted). Situation of accepting *before* knowing what is accepted is not paradoxical, impossible or unusual<sup>10</sup>, but stems from the principle of givenness of the phenomenon: it gives itself from itself alone. It is given before it can be seen, before it shows itself. By receiving it the givee receives itself: it becomes the givee, the receiver, the gifted one. Therefore *adonné*, unlike the «subject», is constituted as such by the phenomenon. This operation is accomplished not by destroying the «subject», but by reversing the direction. It is worth noting that it is not made by force, but only with consent and decision: since phenomenon is received as given by performing reduction. In such a way, operator of the reduction is completely transformed during this reduction, which he or she himself/herself performs.<sup>11</sup> How it practically works will be analyzed later in this paper. At this moment the important point is the connection between decision and reception of the phenomenon.

### *Humiliation*

To emphasize the definition, *adonné* is the one who receives *itself* from what it receives.<sup>12</sup> Another important aspect (besides the will to receive) concerning the givee and springing from its definition is consent with a certain humiliation: it is not the first, but the second. One does not master, but is dependent. One cannot foresee, predict, repeat, control, since she is given more than she is capable of seeing and receiving. He is not an active player, also not a passive observer: one is put into active passivity of receiving. The work to be done is to become capable of receiving.<sup>13</sup> Renouncing the (accustomed!) position of a controlling agent is a step of will which requires trust. Therefore formation of a gaze, suitable to be blinded by the excess of the given, is in the field of practice, although reason (thinking) helps it as an advisor, a counselor, an in-former.

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<sup>9</sup> There is a tale with a personage commanding: «go *I don't know where*, bring *I don't know what*». It quite precisely depicts this existential situation.

<sup>10</sup> Naturally it is quite usual for one to receive without knowing: when going to a theatre, cinema or simply turning on TV one definitively does not know what impact she is going to receive. It is not usual to question if these sources of impact are worth the trust they are given with superabundance, massively, daily.

<sup>11</sup> Marion J.-L. *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2002, 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Marion, *In Excess*, op. cit.; see also Marion J.-L. *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 264.

*Adonné* has a crucial function in the process of appearing of a saturated phenomenon. Here we come to an important gap between givenness and phenomenality. According to Marion, it is not enough for a given to give itself in order to phenomenalyze, that is, to show itself. *Adonné* measures in itself this gap between givenness and phenomenality, which is accomplished as much as reception allows it.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, *adonné* phenomenalyzes the given. She reveals what is given as a phenomenon, i. e. as what shows itself.<sup>15</sup> It proceeds as following: the given is projected on the givee as light is projected on a screen, or a prism. It receives the unseen, unknown given as its impact, as its effect, and transforms it into visible response. Of course, at the same time *adonné* appears: the prism or the screen does not appear *before* the event.<sup>16</sup> One may ask if «showing itself» means obtaining an object from what was not it and a possibility to apply the procedure of common knowledge. Analysis of a particular phenomenon – face as icon – will show that it is not the case. Saturated phenomenon remains irreducible to an object, although its showing itself provides nothing to be looked at.

I will use this theoretical basis for illustration of a particular case, that of a face. It will give a better understanding of in what way knowledge with respect to the saturated phenomenon can be thought.

### Face as Icon

Way to a phenomenon of a face of the other has been made by Emmanuel Levinas, and Marion admits he owes much to him. However, Marion manages to widen approach to the other, to the face of the other, by interpreting it as a saturated phenomenon. He insists that face of the other appears properly when seen not as an object, or even as limited to ethics, but more radically – as an icon. That is, as case of a type of the saturated phenomenon<sup>17</sup>. It is a paradox which escapes the look (objective), but appears, and nevertheless – unable to be looked at.

### *Invisible Other as Icon*

To accept the face as icon means, first of all, that the givee (if she decides to receive it) receives an excess of intuition, which cannot be univocally put into concepts, cannot be known, and she remains in awe. The icon is invisible and escapes any relation to thought, since it is defined as crossing of invisible gazes. One can easily make sure of the invisibility of a gaze: it cannot be identified with any form or colour, or anything subject to objectification. If a face of the other, therefore, the other, cannot

<sup>14</sup> Marion, *In Excess*, op. cit., 49.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 50; Marion, *Being Given*, op. cit., 265.

<sup>17</sup> Other types are: idol, event, flesh and Revelation.

be known (described as an object), can I *know* him/her (to know ones wife; to cognize)? Secondly, how can the face be recognized as such?

Marion is not prostrate by discovering that the other is invisible.<sup>18</sup> It could be an unsolvable problem for a philosophy which thinks a person as only thinking. The other would announce itself as inaccessible by definition. In fact, it was already announced when the other was thought as recognizable by analogy.<sup>19</sup> *Adonné* is a solution both practical and theoretical: if one is capable of becoming more than a constituting «subject» by making a step of faith and leaping down from the high position of mastery to the level of accepting, he accedes to the other through receiving him/her, at the same time receiving itself as a givee. Fundamentally it lies in receiving the other's gaze. Here, in the crossing of gazes, the process of inverted intentionality is clearly given: my objective intentionality (which cannot change itself, since the seeking *I* still does not know what to look for, and how to look at) is overflowed, submerged and inverted by the other's gaze, which to my great wonder, is invisible to me. Thus my objective aims are annuled.

### (Re)cognizing a Call

One imagines (or remembers) that the situation described is a situation of risk. It is impossible to receive the gaze of the other if the *I* does not let itself be seen. Being seen without seeing is experienced as nakedness and fragility. In such a way it is obvious that knowing the other is a matter of bearing this inconvenient position, which is possible on the condition of love: it is possible to trust only in it. Therefore, a decision to love and to believe in other's love is a condition for knowing the other.<sup>20</sup>

The above mentioned and already illustrated instrument of cognition – voluntary humiliation, i. e. humility – also functions as a medium for a loving crossing of gazes. Marion states that the two gazes are seeking not each other (we may suspect it would not result in a *loving* crossing), but the common ground, common level<sup>21</sup>. In another text he puts it like this: to look for each other

«means that, as rivals eye one another and provoke each other, each tries to situate himself at the point where the look of the other could, consequently, settle on him... I take for myself his point of view on me, without reducing it to my point of view on him; and thus he comes to me»<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Marion J.-L. *Prolegomena to Charity*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2002, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Husserl does not give a way to accede to the other directly: “the other's flesh in effect remains merely inferred from his visible behaviors, by analogy with my flesh and behaviors...”; see Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, op. cit., 162.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>22</sup> Marion, *In Excess*, op. cit., 37.

Such encounter is experienced as equilibrium in feeling the weight of the impact of each other's gaze.<sup>23</sup> It would be a methodological mistake to imagine two items, one of which is higher and needs to become smaller, while the other one having nothing to do. We reject the perspective of the «scientific observer». Rather, if we imagine two vessels of water of unequal height, each of the two is the higher one, which in the process of leveling down to the same point has to become smaller, or second. The primacy of the other is not based on his ontological status which is objectively higher than mine. It comes from the fact that the gifted receives itself receiving the gift of the other and admitting it. Reciprocal, precisely said, reversible humility becomes the medium of the «common ground» – of a terrace for cognition of the other as such.

Saturated phenomena are also called paradoxes, since they are not given univocally, but with plenitude of endless meanings. The same is applied to the face. What is seen in the icon does not result from constitution of an object, giving a single «message», but from its effect, impact on the givee. One stops being a constituting *I* and becomes a witness, which is being constituted by what happens to him, that is, by this event. How can it appear, if one cannot look at it? Here part of the answer is given by Levinas: it appears as much as «...the face speaks»<sup>24</sup>. This speaking, according to Marion, is not limited to univocal expression, since it does not mean verbal words, but requires endless hermeneutics. Receiving the impact of the face of the other *adonné* may still not understand what it strikes him with in silence.<sup>25</sup> Therefore interpreting the other in loving him lasts in time without giving any final interpretation, with a constant call to understand, to hear. It appears as a form of a call – which is another way to state the primacy of the other.

«The icon gives itself to be seen in that it makes me hear [understand] its call».<sup>26</sup>

The call appears in and through its addressee – through response it becomes visible. At the same time it avoids object visibility, which would be accessible to a third party, and remains a non-object between the two. This cognitive limitation nevertheless does not make the knowledge of the other less reliable or even less evident. Knowing the other makes an impact on me – a crucial impact, which not only affects and changes me, but gives me as me (not as *I*). The evidence in the crossing of gazes is even stronger since it is undeniable, it happens as a fact.

### One Intentionality at a Time

If we agree that a gaze capable of acceding to the face of the other contradicts all object intentionalities, it is natural to state the impossibility of living in such an attitude. This conclusion comes as a result

<sup>23</sup> Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, op. cit., 90.

<sup>24</sup> Marion, *In Excess*, op. cit., 116.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

due to our way of living, which is «earthly»: we have to participate in social situations, take up certain roles, perform actions of economic exchange. Intentionalities we are using become the alternative of this non-intentionality or counter-intentionality, counter-consciousness which the other gives: «The other, or my loss of consciousness»<sup>27</sup>. The gaze of the other submerges my gaze and all my intentionalities as a wave of opposite direction, «leaving myself destitute of all intentionality, and thus of all egoity»<sup>28</sup>. At first glance it seems one should in some way renounce intentionality in herself in order to become capable of encounter and knowledge of the other. However, an opposing argument can be given: in order to pay the price (of my intentionality, my consciousness, my *ego*), one must have something to pay with. One comes with the intentionality he has, and until it is not submerged, or reversed by the gaze of a loving other, it does not know how to look (know), or rather – how to be looked at (be known). Therefore, it is not a matter of improving, changing or eliminating natural intentionality, but of decision of will to accept love and to love in return. If it lies in this decision and does not depend on intentionality, which is overflowed in any case, as a result it should be stated that knowing by loving is livable. Moreover, to state the opposite is contradictory, or at least hypocritical. It means that one moment the givee accepts the loving gaze and loves in return, loses his egoity and egoistic intention, and after some time, let us suppose several seconds, he takes it back and performs some purely egoistic actions, such as buying bread in a local market from the girl he has met in a crossing of gazes. There is no objection that it happens, and it is not contradictory in a sense that it is possible. The contradiction lies in the unjustness which is felt here. The solution is that in the act of buying and selling the gifted ones do not take back their gifts. The situation of economic exchange is not an alternative to an event of counter-intentionality, but a medium for it. In the light of this situation it can be agreed that indeed only one intentionality is possible at a time: that determined by my decision to accept or to reject a gaze of the other.

### Conclusions and comments

Face as a saturated phenomenon is invisible and by definition not an object of knowledge. Nevertheless, it appears as a phenomenon for the two parties involved in a crossing of gazes. As perfectly new in a sense of a new phenomenon as well as a new way of knowing, it is the cognition, requiring an endless hermeneutics. Application of solely traditional (objective) meaning of knowledge does not allow to accede to the face of the other. The further one goes in the direction of objective knowledge, the farther away one strays from the phenomenon of excess. However, the possibility of seeing the other as such remains open, since it does not depend on objective intentionality, but grounds itself on decision of will. Adequation, evidence in a traditional sense are not operative. Instead

<sup>27</sup> Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, op. cit., 83.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 98.



these categories are replaced by equilibrium experienced as a common level in the crossing of gazes. An undeniable character of this event gives evidence incomparable to evidence of adequation. This evidence gives reason to relate the event to cognition, not merely «experience». Decision to accept it requires a certain cost from *adonné* (the gifted, the givee), one of which is a certain humiliation. Consenting to the position of a second, a constituting (blind) «subject» becomes the one who receives itself by receiving what gives itself – the gifted (blinded, therefore not blind). It is not the knowledge *about* saturated phenomenon, although it helps to accede to it by pointing towards, but knowledge *of* it itself. After interrogating the relation of common intentionality to the state of its submersion by the gaze of the other the conclusion is made that «intentionality of love», which allows cognition (and recognition) of the other, *is* a livable state. To add, it is precisely the aim of the gifted – to receive the gift without measure or limit and to become one in return. In other words, to constantly grow in knowing how to know.

«Only the one who has lived with the life and the death of another person knows to what extent he or she does *not know* that other. This one alone can therefore recognize the other as the saturated phenomenon *par excellence*, and consequently also knows that it would take an eternity to envisage this saturated phenomenon as such – not constituting it as an object, but interpreting it in loving it».<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Marion, *In Excess*, op. cit., 127.