

## **Phenomenology and Orthodoxy: Personhood as Perspective of a Possible Dialog**

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### **Abstract**

My aim, in the following pages, is to detail some potential interaction points between Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness and the Christian Orthodox perspective regarding the concept of "person", and, thus, to sketch a preliminary dialog horizon. For this, in the first section of my text I am going to take into consideration what was called "the critique of the subject" and the new possibilities for alternative descriptions of man brought by the failure of the modern paradigm. In the next segment I will be dealing with the way in which the phenomenology of givenness can be described as a direct answer to the crisis of the way of perceiving man. Finally, I will try to argue that we can take advantage of this new perspective developed by phenomenology in order to outline some guiding lines for a possible fruitful interaction with the Christian Orthodox tradition of understanding man as "person".

**Keywords:** Orthodoxy, Personhood, Possibility, Dialogue, Phenomenology of Givenness.

### **1. Introduction**

When we attempt to write in philosophical terms about man as a knowing entity or even about man in general, we tend to avoid designating him as the subject. Nevertheless, when we do employ the term, we take a whole range of precautionary measures – either using quotation marks or resorting to various explanatory notes – all of this in order to avoid being in the spotlight of a critique of the subject. To get a clearer view of this topical context, we must, first of all, have

an adequate description of what is understood by subject; this description must reflect the problematical character of the subject and the reason why the interference with its elbowroom ought to be avoided.

## 2. Subjective Shortcomings

From a general perspective, we can approximate the subject in the hypostasis of man as a specific and autonomous reality<sup>1</sup>. Based on these two determinations, we can perceive that, above all, the subject is radically different from all other types of being, as it is wholly independent of them. However, this is not a mutual relationship, as being in general and the Being itself are constituted only through the relationship with the subject, who is the a priori condition of all experience and consequently of all that is and may be for us<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the whole world is articulated around the subject, understood as its unique reference point, therefore, to understand a certain configuration of the world, we must understand, to begin with, the coordinates of the subject.

At the same time, in order to come to a more specific approach, we can assume that, since the current philosophical approach of man must take a whole series of precautions to maintain its distance from the subject, we are dealing with a concept which is deeply ingrained in our thought, one which originated before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the historical moments worth recalling in the attempt to approximate the articulation of the subject is the Renaissance reconfiguration of man as *homo faber* and of the world as a product of this human hypostasis<sup>3</sup>. At that point in time, man consciously assumed the task of articulating the world by himself and his own place in it. However, Descartes and Kant remain the most widely

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michel Henry, „The Critique of the Subject”, in Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (ed.), *Who Comes After the Subject?*, Routledge, New York and London, 1991, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> For further details of this redefinition of man and his world, see Jürgen Mittelstrass, *Leonardo-Welt: über Wissenschaft, Forschung und Verantwortung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1992, in particular I. „Homo Faber und die Zukunft der Wissenschaft”, pp. 11-102.

quoted references for the strengthening of the status of the subject – if not for its emergence also.

For Descartes, the task of philosophy would be to explore things not according to an ontic hierarchy independent of thought – in which entities such as God or the soul occupy a privileged place – but rather by observing the order of reason and the order of things in the process of knowledge<sup>4</sup>. This approach would lead to the subject taking precedence as the very first entity which is capable of knowing itself and on which depends the knowledge of all other entities. The world of philosophy would then be built around and through the subject thus established<sup>5</sup>. In his turn, Kant only emphasized this orientation, to the extent that the possibility of phenomena in general would be dependent on the formal conditions of experience, more precisely on the relationship between intuition and concept<sup>6</sup>. However, it is not the material provided by intuition that takes precedence, but rather the concept – what the faculty of knowledge adds by itself<sup>7</sup>. In such a context, the whole of being is subjected exclusively to the entity of the subject<sup>8</sup>.

This modern perspective on man and the world did not remain inefficacious at all, as its consequences were most significant. We can notice first of all that, to acquire its noetic privilege, the subject must assume the status of transcendental entity, thereby separating itself from its empirical coordinates,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. „Lettres à Merssene”, in Charles Adam și Paul Tannery (ed.), *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vol. III, Vrin, Paris, 1971, pp. 235, 239.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît. Études sur les phénomènes saturés*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2001, pp. 10-13.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 1956, p. 266.

<sup>7</sup> For a critical discussion of this hierarchy of intuition and concept in Immanuel Kant's philosophy, refer to Jean-Luc Marion, „Le phénomène saturé”, in *Le visible et le révélé*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2005, pp. 35-74.

<sup>8</sup> We can delve deeper into this issue, by inquiring about the source of this primacy of the subject, what causes this amendment of man's position in the world, yet this would only causes us to deviate from the theme of this section of the text: drawing up a picture of the subject that should facilitate the understanding of its problematic character.

from space and time<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, the conception of man as a subject establishes an inadequate relationship with one's self, with one's history and with the situatedness of one's being<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, the transcendentalization of the subject imposes a unilateral dimension of the relationship with the other, whether understood as a stranger. To be more precise, the subject cannot, in any way, be questioned by the other<sup>11</sup>; it cannot assume the hypostasis of the questioned. This situation may be extrapolated to the relationship with phenomena in general. In this case, the critique will be addressed in particular by phenomenology.

While the area of phenomena is strictly configured in advance by the subject's knowledge capabilities, an entire section of phenomenality is forced to show itself only by molding on various frames which are inadequate to such manifestation or to be completely left aside<sup>12</sup>. From the fact that the subject cannot be questioned and that, consequently, its surrounding space is constructed by it in a unilateral manner, thus reinforcing the Renaissance hypostasis of man as *homo faber*, stems the obvious inadequate relationship with the world itself, a relationship which leads to an ever sharper technologization of the world<sup>13</sup>. All these implications of the philosophy of the subject are losing any trace of legitimacy for us nowadays<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît*, ed. cit., pp. 13-15.

<sup>10</sup> The reactions to these implications of the subject include: Martin Heidegger's *hermeneutical phenomenology* or Hans-Georg Gadamer *philosophical hermeneutics*, coupled with their derived philosophical orientations, either as a natural continuation or in contrast to them.

<sup>11</sup> As regards this critique, the first philosopher that comes to mind is Emmanuel Lévinas. On the other hand, such a critique is commonplace in 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy, identifiable in authors such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur or even Mircea Eliade.

<sup>12</sup> Currently, Jean-Luc Marion is, by far, the most representative philosopher for this type of critique leveled at traditional metaphysics and consequently at the modern conception of the subject.

<sup>13</sup> As regards the critique of modern technology its representative was Martin Heidegger and also the movement established around the Frankfurt School.

<sup>14</sup> Obviously, the subject is not the only instance responsible for this situation and, supposedly, not even its primary cause. All the listed

From the more general perspective of grammar, we can notice that the effects listed above of the modern forthcoming of the subject are dependent on an unfortunate positioning in the field of action of categories. More precisely, man, as described in modern metaphysics, is primarily, if not exclusively, determined by the horizon of the nominative category. The benefit of this view is that it can indicate what lies beyond the subject's privilege, namely the scarcity of his world, the category possibilities that cannot be activated by principle. The subject is always a *who*, the action's agent, never identifiable in a passive hypostasis, as *to whom* or *whom*. As a result, a whole range of categories remains obscured. The subject cannot benefit from the opportunities provided by the condition of mere receiver. His world can in no way be dislocated by contact with the exterior, thus being condemned to be extinguished and ultimately descend to nihilism<sup>15</sup>.

### 3. Echoes of the Subject. The Person

The historical longevity of the philosophy of the subject – as its efficacy can still be perceived presently, considering the observation made at the beginning of the text – warrants an inquiry into whether its specter extends beyond the philosophical discourse. By referring, for example, to a passage from a book by Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, which states that the person is “the starting point for attaining the fact of

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critiques can refer to wider contexts, where the subject is linked as a single variable. The history of philosophy can represent such contexts as *Platonism* (Nietzsche) or the *oblivion of Being* (Heidegger), to mention just two examples. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized, once again, that this paper does not aim to cover such a vast area, as its purpose, for the moment, is limited to one particular area: to outline a clear perspective on the critique of the subject.

<sup>15</sup> It was perhaps not by accident that Nietzsche came to perceive the resources concealed in the passive hypostasis of the “subject” (see *Der Wille zur Macht*, 1. und 2. Buch, Gesammelte Werke, Band XVIII, Musarion-Verlag, München, 1926 § 382, pp. 265-267). A comprehensive presentation of this issue is available in the book by George Bondor, *Dansul măștilor. Nietzsche și filosofia interpretării* [The Dance of Masks. Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Interpretation], Editura Humanitas, Bucharest, 2008, pp. 29-76.

existence in itself"<sup>16</sup>, we may have the impression that we are in the same horizon of the subject, around which the whole being is organized. This reading is confirmed, by all appearances, immediately, on the following page. Although he rejects explicitly the priority of the subject in the formation of the world, Yannaras only seems to do this in order to instate the entity of the person, therefore keeping the same metaphysical topos<sup>17</sup>. More precisely, even though the person were found in a previous level to that of the subject, it still manifests, supposedly, its capacity of coagulate all that there is and remains the exclusive source of meaning of our world.

Based on this short reference, it would not be difficult at all to anticipate that indeed the horizon of the subject's control involves a reach that extends beyond the philosophical discourse. However, to free ourselves from this paradigm it is not enough to attempt to simply discard it. Such an attitude would only mean that we are only redefining the space of thought through a mere contrast with the philosophy of the subject, hence based on its dependence to it<sup>18</sup>. This objection to an exclusively destructive attitude to the subject becomes clearer if we refer again to the field of grammar. Simply demoting the nominative, in a situation when the other categories are inactive, would only mean a positioning in a field of action devoid of references, hence a descent into radical nihilism. That is why the critical attitude towards the subject's primacy must be coupled with an attempt to allow the other category areas to enter our thought and attitude.

#### **4. The Phenomenology of Givenness**

One of the philosophical orientations that can be subsumed to this prescription is the *phenomenology of givenness*, initiated by Jean-Luc Marion. However, before outlining the configuration of man's field of action within the

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<sup>16</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Persoana și Eros* [Person and Eros], Romanian edition translated by Zenaida Luca, Anastasia, 2000, Bucharest, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> On the same issue, see Martin Heidegger, „Zeit und Sein”, in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, GA 14, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 2007, pp. 29-30.

phenomenology of givenness, it must be emphasized that its relevance goes beyond the strict horizon of subject criticism. Marion's whole project is based, essentially, on the realization that both in modern metaphysics and classical phenomenology, certain phenomena – which the French phenomenologist calls “saturated” or “paradoxes” – have been deprived of an adequate perspective for relating to them<sup>19</sup>. These phenomena are those that always surpass their initial field of manifestation, as established by our power of anticipation; these are the phenomena that cannot be subsumed to concepts and cannot be controlled by our faculty of knowledge. From the perspective of intentionality – of the combinations between *intention* and *intuition* – the saturated phenomena populate the elbowroom of the excess of intuition over intention. We can consider for example phenomena such as the *historic event*, which fundamentally cannot be presumed or circumscribed ahead of its occurrence and even afterwards. In such a situation, it is not us who trace the borders of the phenomenon's manifestation, but rather the phenomenon itself enforces a new context to our thought and life<sup>20</sup>. The examination of such phenomena is not however absent from modern metaphysics as Marion himself indicates, as he points to certain references by Descartes about *infinity* or to Kant's writings on the *sublime*<sup>21</sup>. What is still problematic is the fact that saturated phenomena have always been analyzed through the lens of inadequate frameworks and certain limits imposed on phenomenality – either represented by the *requirement of clear and distinct knowledge* (Descartes), *the principle of sufficient reason* (Leibniz) or the *formal conditions of*

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<sup>19</sup> This situation is explicitly dealt with in Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné. Essai d'un phénoménologie de la donation*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1997, I. „La donation”, pp. 13-102 or in *De surcroît*, ed. cit., I. „Phénoménologie de la donation et philosophie première”, pp. 1-33.

<sup>20</sup> Marion discusses the *event* as a saturated phenomenon in *Étant donné*, ed. cit., § 23, „Topique du phénomène”, pp. 318-319; and in *De surcroît*, ed. cit., II. „L'événement ou le phénomène advenant”, pp. 35-63.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. idem, “Le phénomène saturé”, in *Le visible et le révélé*, Les Editions de Cerf, Paris, 2005, pp. 72-73.

*experience* (Kant), which, in agreement with their own essence, provide a distorted view on the excess of intuition over intention. Thus, in the horizon of modern metaphysics and in that of classical phenomenology also, the possibility of saturated phenomena is achieved not in a free context, but in the context of a *leap* to effectiveness out of the impossibility previously imposed on phenomenality. In other words, the saturated phenomenon *occurs* on a platform wholly unfamiliar to it, without the possibility of adequate reception<sup>22</sup>.

According to Marion, this problematic situation can be solved through a reorganization of phenomenology in order to grant absolute manifestation possibilities to phenomena in general. Thus, the French phenomenologist does not refrain from calling phenomenology a “counter-method”, understood as the effort of phenomenology not to build an instrument that should mediate our relationship with phenomena, but to surpass such theoretical constructs in order to have a more adequate (direct) relationship with phenomena. “The initial and final paradox of phenomenology, Marion writes, stems precisely from this: that it takes the initiative in losing it”.<sup>23</sup> In fact, to give phenomena total freedom to manifest themselves, the French phenomenologist puts into play what he calls “the third reduction”. The very name of this third hypostasis of reduction is meant to differentiate it from the reductive procedures that are found in classical phenomenology. It will lead neither to the *transcendental ego*, as in the Husserlian phenomenology, nor to a hypostasis of the *Being* – whether it be called “nothingness”, “the call of Being” or something else – typical of Heideggerian phenomenology, but to *givenness*. Thus, the principle of the new phenomenology, as outlined by Marion, shall be: “So much reduction, so much givenness”<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. idem, *Étant donné*, ed. cit., § 19, „L’horizon et le Je”, pp. 252-253.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, §1, „Le dernier principe”, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> As the new phenomenology is determined as a phenomenology of *givenness*, the principle can be found in several of Marion’s works such as *Reduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1989, p. 303; *Étant donné*, ed. cit., § 1, „Le dernier principe” p. 24; *De surcroît*, ed. cit., p. 22.

The role of reduction in the new phenomenology can be viewed in different ways, depending on the phenomena to which it refers. In a first category, we can include phenomena which do not display an excess of intuition over intention. Their givenness is exposed following a reduction perfectly controlled by the phenomenologist<sup>25</sup>. The second category shall be assigned to saturated phenomena. In this case, the reduction can be observed manifesting in two totally distinct stages. First, the reception of the givenness of saturated phenomena presupposes what we might see as a first hypostasis of reduction – an advance preparation for their manifestation and a relative release from the idols that could stand in the way of an adequate reception<sup>26</sup>. The second hypostasis of reduction is exercised simultaneously with the manifestation of the saturated phenomena, yet not coming from the phenomenologist, but from the phenomena themselves<sup>27</sup>. More precisely, once they manifest, the saturated phenomena exceed the prior structures that

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<sup>25</sup> Formally, this type of reduction, given its perfectly controllable nature, is identical to that found in Husserl's phenomenology. Analyzing a phenomenon, as an antique painting, of little artistic value, Marion clarifies successively the manner in which its *phenomenality* is dependent neither on its being *present-at-hand* [Vorhandenheit] (its subsistence), nor on its *readiness-to-hand* [Zuhandenheit] or even its status as *being* [Seiend]. What provides the source of phenomenality of the painting is the fact that it is given to us. (See Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné*, § 5, „La Réduction au donné”, pp. 60-78).

<sup>26</sup> The approximate character of this preparation is due to the peculiarity of the saturated phenomena, to the fact their area of manifestation cannot be circumscribed in advance; and the fact that their manifestation is uncontrollable by principle.

<sup>27</sup> I believe that this latter hypostasis of reduction – which, supposedly, brings about a reversal of the principle of Marion's phenomenology: *So much givenness, so much reduction!* – can be identified, again only formally, in the Heideggerian phenomenology. I refer specifically to the way in which anxiety [Angst], for example, in *Was ist Metaphisik?*, operates a reduction which frees itself from the phenomenologist's control. (Also refer to Jean-François Courtine, „La problématique de la réduction”, in Jean-Luc Marion et Guy Planty-Bonjour (ed.), *Phénoménologie et métaphysique*, Presses Universitaire de France, 1984, pp. 211-245.)

configured our world, establishing a new context, their own order, if we may say so. Thus, as they are not subject to a prior order, saturated phenomena owe their phenomenality to the simple fact of *being given*<sup>28</sup>.

Following the analyses mentioned above, we can observe, according to Marion, that “No being, no actuality, no appearance, no concept, and no sensation could reach us, or even concern us, if it did not first give [itself] to us”<sup>29</sup>. This observation, that all phenomena are given, that their scope can be managed by the phenomenology of givenness indicates that Marion’s approach comes close to the ideal of a *first philosophy*. The *primary* character of the philosophy of givenness can be asserted in relation to the other branches of systematic knowledge – penetrating to a deeper level than all these directions – yet its explicit goal is to allow the *phenomena* to reveal themselves, ahead of any systematizing interference. Considering this deferential attitude to phenomena – which is what makes a difference! – the phenomenology of givenness is in fact the “ultimate philosophy” [philosophie dernière]<sup>30</sup>. It always manifests *in the posteriority* of the occurrence of the phenomenon, providing the conditions of possibility not of the phenomenon itself but of its reception.

#### **4.1. Images of the Possibility of Excess**

Since we have just catalogued these general guidelines of the project of a phenomenology of givenness, it is reasonable to ask the following question: if all the phenomena are given, beyond all a priori, beyond any preliminary conditions

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<sup>28</sup> The new status of givenness – that of principle of the whole phenomenality – is reinforced by Marion as he highlights the fact that even phenomena such as *nothingness* – in its various interpretations: as void, as possibility (absence of effectiveness), as obscurity – or *death* are also given (see *Étant donné*, ed. cit., § 5, pp. 78-87). Certainly, the debate about givenness can be more extensive, however I believe that this approximation of its status in Marion’s phenomenology is sufficient given the purpose of this paper.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, § 5 „Privilège de donation”, pp. 79-80.

<sup>30</sup> Marion deals with the “ultimate philosophy” status of givenness in *De surcroît*, pp. 27-31.

established by a hypostasis of the subject, what is man's place, as a knowing entity, in this new horizon described by Marion? Based on what has been outlined so far, it is obvious that man can no longer claim hegemony over the category of the nominative. Considering that in the horizon of the phenomenology of givenness, phenomena truly have the first and last word, regards man we can approximate a passive condition, which is precisely the elbowroom of grammar ignored by modern metaphysics.

The new topography of man, as he is described by the phenomenology of givenness can be more clearly outlined if we also consider the way in which a saturated phenomenon is given to us according to Marion. Let us take as an example the *face* of the other. It manifests, first of all, the privilege of vision. This fact is responsible for the inadequacy of my relation to the other's face as to a show, because, as Marion notes, the other's vision is not given to be gazed at or seen, but only to be endured<sup>31</sup>. Once it manifests as a saturated phenomenon, the other's face manages to clear our attention of any prior prejudices that could, in any way, tamper with our reception capacity, stigmatizing them as inadequate. Thus, it should be noted not only that the "subject" is deprived of his capacity to build the exterior, but also that he is himself called into question by the other's gaze; he is given the position of *witness* of the emergence of the other's face.

The face poses, first of all, an ethical requirement – i.e. tolerance. I must always open myself to the other; to make room for the phenomenalization of his face and to listen to him. In other words, by this openness, I must always perceive the other while taking into account his demands. However, this ethical coordinate of the relationship with the other's face can be overcome, according to Marion, thus managing to perceive him in a more broad perspective, as *icon*. We will thus be able to receive the *call* of the face, which will demand my *respect*, meaning the attention that the icon raises and the distance I must keep so as not to affect its emergence<sup>32</sup>. The injunction

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. idem, *Étant donné*, ed. cit., § 23, p. 324.

<sup>32</sup> See *De surcroît*, ed. cit. p. 143.

given by the face – “Thou shalt not kill!” – sets the scene, according to Marion, for a phenomenological deployment much broader than that of ethics. What comes into the light here is the pure *call*, the requirement given by the phenomenon as it moves towards manifestation, the requirement to remove any obstacles that might force it to show itself in an inadequate manner. Thus, the scope of the call is not only ethical, but also existentiell – “Become who you are!”; existential – “Determine yourself as the being for whom being is at stake!”; religious – “Love your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind!”; erotic – “Love me!”<sup>33</sup>.

All these converge in a single conclusion, that there is no unique or ultimate meaning of the face, which can be clearly identified and eventually captured in a concept. Failing to consider this aspect can lead to the distortion of the gaze of the other and the loss of any meaning of the call that the gaze is addressing to me. The access to the other’s icon is achieved, in fact, only in waiting, because the truth of the face lies in its history<sup>34</sup>. At the same time, we cannot be certain that the end of the other, that is the last expression of this face, would also bring its last and true meaning. Therefore, the saturated phenomenon that is the face of the other demands an “infinite hermeneutic”<sup>35</sup>.

If we attempted to approximate man’s status as knowing entity, based on this description of the contact with the face of the other, we would note, following Marion’s lead, that an active condition is improbable, to say the least. Given his status as *observer*, it is obvious that man leaves the category of the nominative to be placed in the passive category horizons of relationship, i.e. dative and accusative. Man leaves the category of *nominative* to establish himself in the *dative*. He becomes the entity *to whom* the phenomenon in general is given. Continuing on this grammatical line, it is important to note that although man’s new horizon – *the dative* – is not definitive, it remains one of his basic coordinates, the status of

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 147.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 148-153.

the *affected*. More precisely, the category elbowroom of man will be defined, in addition to the *dative*, by the *accusative*. Man is legitimized now as the gifted [l'adonné], according to Marion: „the one who receives itself from what it receives, *the one to whom what gives itself* from a first self - every phenomenon - gives a secondary me, that of reception and response”<sup>36</sup>. In this manner, as the phenomenon has the first and last word, man is not only distinguished from the hypostasis of subject, of the nominative, he is also able to capitalize on the other category fields.

Nevertheless, it would be injudicious to assign to man *only* a passive condition based on the discussion about the gifted. The fact of receiving, proper to the gifted, requires, besides passive receptivity, preparation for optimal reception, adequacy for the given – hence an active coordinate<sup>37</sup>. This preparation for the given, for its reception and, implicitly, for the gifted's self-reception is perpetual, that is why the gifted shares with the Heideggerian *Dasein* the status of *possible being*.

#### **4.2. Category Flexibility and Flexion of the Subject's Prejudice**

We can obviously wonder to what extent the active coordinate of the gifted poses a potential danger for Marion's project; to what degree it involves certain remnants of the metaphysical subject. If we consider the accusative hypostasis of the subject, it is not at all difficult to observe it as being established by the givenness of the phenomenon – the givenness of the phenomenon, as we have noted, is followed by the givenness of a secondary *me*. This does not seem to be the case for the dative category. Does the reception of the phenomenon not presuppose the priority of the entity *to which* the phenomenon is given? Hence, the phenomenon, precisely as in the metaphysical tradition denounced by Marion, would occur on a platform which is not its own and which can,

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 57-58.

therefore, determine it. This issue is raised by Ian Leask<sup>38</sup>. His main claim is based on certain assertions made by Marion himself with regard to the “principle of principles”, enounced by Husserl in *Ideen I*<sup>39</sup>. There, as the German phenomenologist talks about intuition as the basic source of knowledge, it is stated that all that it offers is given *to us*. Marion would regard this situation as the sign of a limit, because “the givenness of a phenomenon on the basis of itself to an I can at any instant veer toward a constitution of the phenomenon by and on the basis of the I”. Consequently, according to Lesak, this same danger threatens the phenomenology of givenness. However, before sharing such a perspective, I think we must return to the passage from *Étant donné* where Marion’s claim occurs. We can then note that the “I” *to whom* the phenomenon is given is interchangeable with the nominative “I”. This convertibility does not have an absolute value however, but is due exclusively to the context investigated by Marion – the context of the Husserlian phenomenology.

We can make further observations for this case, where Leask’s objection proves to be undamaging. Inevitably, such a critical attitude now becomes a potential example of what we can describe as a *negative variant of the subject prejudice*. Whereas in positive terms we can argue that in the presence of the subject the world is coagulated around him, conversely, we could speculate that the presence of a configuration of the world requires the presence of a subject as a coagulating reference. Thus, the prejudice of the subject can hold up even in an anti-subjective framework, as the intention to expose the whole range of subject hypostases takes on obsessive forms. The subject, always the target in the playing fields of all sorts of conceptual deployments, is artificially maintained *as* the adversary. We must indeed be careful, whenever we attempt to capitalize on categories such as the dative or the accusative, not to subordinate them to a prior active coordinate, without

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<sup>38</sup> See Ian Leask, „The Dative Subject (and the Principle of Principles)”, in Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy (ed.), *Givenness and God*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2004, pp. 182-189.

<sup>39</sup> See Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Husserliana, Band III, 1, Martinus Nijhoff, Den Haag, 1976, § 24, „Das Prinzip aller Prinzipien”, p. 51.

nonetheless failing in a type of excessive critique of the subject, thus giving rise to a vicious effect.

Following these considerations, we must examine whether the negative prejudice of the subject may have penetrated even the earlier sections of this article. More precisely, we will have to investigate, in greater detail, the verdict which, apparently, could have been given with regard to certain contemporary views on man. In this respect, the explicit example was the issue of personhood, as discussed by Christos Yannaras.

### **5. Personhood. The Supremacy of Relation.**

I have mentioned, as the reference for the denunciation of the present-day explanation of the person in the shadow of subject's dominance, the fact that it, the person, is determined as a starting point for attaining the whole of being. However, examining more carefully now Yannaras's book, we can observe that such a determination occurs against the background of understanding the person as *relation*. In other words, instead of conceiving man as an absolute, self-sufficient reference point, with the privilege to constitute the whole exterior reality, we find a hypostasis of man placed from the very beginning in relation – with things, with the world, with the others, understood as persons too, and, ultimately, with God – and a definition of this relation<sup>40</sup>. Considering this coordinate, it becomes obvious that the category field that is assigned to the person is broader by principle than that of the subject.

Instead of practicing a hermeneutic of suspicion and starting a witch hunt, we can attempt to capitalize on such a discourse. Instead of seeking to denunciate a concealed hypostasis of a strong (exclusive) nominative, we can trace the genuine dimension of the person, which is prior, according to Yannaras, to any definition of man as subject. Such an approach can find its legitimacy in the horizon of the

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<sup>40</sup> See Christos Yannaras, *Persoană și Eros* [Person and Eros], ed. cit., pp. 21-39.

phenomenology of givenness and the horizon of an advance ridding of prejudice, either positive or negative. Moreover, phenomenology functions at any moment as a cure for the potential interferences of prejudice in the examination of phenomena. Only in this manner can there be established a context of total freedom of manifestation for phenomena, a context of *absolute possibility*, a fact which involves a complete activation of categories such as the dative or the accusative, which are categories of *relation* par excellence. By being placed in the space of the possible, we are freed from the *habit* of granting the subject the main role and are thus given the opportunity to receive a discourse on the person, constituted always *through relation*, not prior to the relation. The phenomenology of givenness and, perhaps more than itself, the requirement of the *possibility* that “determines” it represent therefore not only an occasion to discard a damaging prejudice but also an occasion for dialog and even for understanding a position such as that stated by Yannaras.

At the same time, taking a broader view, we can easily observe that through a book such as *Person and Eros* we have access not to the conception of one thinking man about man, but to the mode of understanding of a wider tradition, that of the Christian East. Thus, the dialog implied here involves a much vaster horizon. For an outline of this dialog, it is useful, even necessary, to consider certain fundamental data of Eastern Christianity regarding the description of man as *person*.

### **5.1. Relation and Possibility**

First of all, it must be stated that in Orthodoxy man is defined by the relation he maintains with God. More precisely, “the perfection of man does not consist in that which assimilates him to the whole of creation, but in that which distinguishes him from the created order and assimilates him to his Creator. Revelation teaches us that man was made in the image and likeness of God”<sup>41</sup>. It is not based on general

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<sup>41</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, translated by a small group of members of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 1976, p. 114.

features, such as the fact that man is among the created, that we should seek man's specificity, but by referring to what distinguishes him from all the creation – his special relation with God. This fundamental determination would prove decisive for the specific view of man of Eastern Christianity.

In contrast with the philosophical discourse of Western modernity, dominated by a "noetic grammar", in the Christian East we are dealing with a "doxological grammar"<sup>42</sup>. Examining this further, we can observe that by setting things as references *to the extent that those things are known* and filtering them based on the requirement of certainty inevitably leads philosophy to viewing man as *individual*. Of primary importance is the knowledge that the *I* has of itself, separate from any determinate relation with the other, which will therefore always have a secondary status. The passive categories will be given a secondary status, whenever they are used, as they are positioned in relation to the prior background of the subject. On the other hand, taking as presupposition the relation with God, the idea of a self-establishment of man as *subject* is excluded from the outset. Only because he is the *image* of God is man defined as *person*, being determined by the relation with God. This relational character of the human person is a reflection of the relationship within Trinity, between the divine hypostases. For this reason, man is defined as relation not only in the sense of a relationship he entertains with God based on his created nature, but because he shares in the divine archetype<sup>43</sup>. The relation that is man is not limited to the divine sphere; it concerns the other human persons as well as things in general. In this manner, the view of man as person has the openness required to avoid being confined by the narrow discourse of modernity on the subject, but also to have access to a free area to allow a real rapprochement to a discourse such as that of the phenomenology of givenness.

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<sup>42</sup> See Corneliu Boingeanu, „Personhood in its Protological and Eschatological Patterns: an Eastern Orthodox View of the Ontology of Personality”, in *Evangelical Quarterly*, January 2006, Vol. 78, Issue 1, pp. 4-5.

<sup>43</sup> See Vladimir Lossky, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-121.

## 5.2. Relation and Difference

Dialog undoubtedly presupposes openness, yet it is facilitated not only by a free space, but also by common positive data and shared references. To capture the possibility of dialog, it is not necessary to list all the shared data; indeed it is sufficient to consider only a few of them. We can, first of all, consider that, since noetic grammar is alien to Eastern Christianity, the other, as person, cannot be known through analogy – or inferentially, in general – but only through direct, experiential relation. Man is no longer the one who imposes the meaning of those which are, implicitly of the neighbour, as this activity is substituted by their direct discovery. Meaning is not instituted, but occurs with the *appearance* of the “things” being considered. This allows the knowledge of the other in his unique and incomparable dimension<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, in his capacity as image of God, the other is revealed to us as being beyond our power to circumscribe and inexhaustible. This situation, the contact with the other as uncircumscribable, and the fact that we define ourselves as persons, hence *through relation* with the other, has inevitable consequences. The contact with the other causes a perpetual transformation of ourselves, a constant broadening of the communion established, highlighting in concrete terms the inadequacy, in such a situation, of an idea such as that of “human essence”.

This perspective on the one who is knowing, typical of Eastern Christianity, is not difficult to approximate to the hypostasis of the gifted in the phenomenology of givenness. First of all, we must consider that we can only talk about knowledge through *direct contact* with the other, experientially then, through unmediated relation with the known “object” – an intrinsic requirement of phenomenology in general. On the other hand, the one who knows – the gifted, in the phenomenology of givenness – receives itself, as already noted, from what it receives, from the entity it comes into contact with. In other words, as in the Eastern Christian context, the articulation of the identity of the one who leads a knowing process is achieved only in relation with the other, a

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<sup>44</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 121-124.

fact which imposes a fluid character to this identity. Nothing as a prior limit sees to prevent, from this perspective, the dialog between the two contexts considered here – between Orthodox Christianity and the phenomenology built by Jean-Luc Marion. The horizons outlined based on the issues of person and gifted respectively seem to be sufficiently flexible to permit a fruitful interaction.

If we consider the other side of the relation with the other, the coherence of Eastern Christianity and the phenomenology of givenness can be further expanded. The person, considering its inexhaustible and uncircumscribable character, can be easily approximated to what Marion calls a saturated phenomenon. We could even develop this rapprochement if we consider the other in parallel as *person* and as what Marion proposes when interpreting the face of the other as *icon*. In both cases, the other exceeds our capacity to delimit the horizon of his manifestation; in both cases, the other contributes to the configuration of the knowing entity's identity.

Furthermore, even the fundamental term of the elbowroom as configured by Orthodoxy *may* be easily put into contact with the phenomenology of givenness – the divine Revelation manages to find its way into the phenomenology of givenness. In this manner, Marion is able to break free from the classical version of phenomenology. More specifically, the Husserlian framework for approaching the issue of God<sup>45</sup> is transgressed due to a different manner of relating to divinity, due to another “conception” of it. God is not so much transcendent, but rather immanent to consciousness, so that following a reduction, he would reinforce his position even more. He is identified with the *living* God of the Christian tradition, not with the metaphysical idol, conceived primarily

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<sup>45</sup> There are two reasons for Husserl's absolute neglect of the problem of God: a) God manifests as an *absolute* being, yet in a different sense from the *transcendental ego*; b) He is transcendent, yet differently from the transcendence of the world. In this respect, He simply exits the scene following the transcendental reduction, as he is neither one with the *transcendental ego*, nor constituted by it (cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen I*, ed. cit., § 58, pp. 124-127).

as a ground of what there is, and of our knowledge of what there is<sup>46</sup>. In the project of an open phenomenology, based on givenness, it would constitute an inconsistency, lacking any motivation, not to deal with the *possible* phenomenality of Revelation.

On the other hand, one objection can be raised here, namely the contradiction between the description of Revelation through saturation of intuition and the apophatic tradition which describes God as darkness, therefore as lacking intuition. In fact, this objection is founded on a misunderstanding primarily of apophatism, but also of intuitive saturation. When referring to God as darkness, the apophatic tradition has always understood this darkness as “supraluminous darkness”<sup>47</sup>. In other words, the saturation of intuition brings unavoidably the inability of the one who receives it to perceive it as such – thus light that is too intense turns into darkness. A decisive limit is reached here. The saturated phenomenon is freed at this point, through the hypostasis of Revelation, not only from those determinations of phenomenality as established by metaphysics, but from their own destruction. “The paradox of paradoxes [the Revelation] does not have to choose between cataphasis and apophasis any more than between saturation and shortage of intuition; it uses them all in order to push to its end the phenomenality of what shows itself only insofar as it gives itself”<sup>48</sup>.

Beyond all this, in order to adequately speak of a dialog, we must take into consideration those differences that can be determined *between* these two horizons, besides the similarities between Eastern Christianity and the phenomenology of givenness. Only then can this dialog become genuine. Perhaps the most important difference lies in the manner of relating to the divinity. While for Christianity the relation with God is always already presupposed, for the phenomenology of givenness the Revelation is only seen in its potential character. More precisely, the phenomenological

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné*, ed. cit., § 24, pp. 335-340.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Dionysius the Areopagite, *Despre teologia mistică* [The Mystical Theology] in *Opere complete*, Romanian edition translated by Dumitru Stăniloae, Paideia, Bucharest, 1996, p. 248.

<sup>48</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

description of Revelation focuses strictly on the *possibility*, in no way on its effectiveness. Phenomenology, by always taking as reference the “things themselves”, cannot actually decide on the issue of the effectiveness of Revelation, leaving this task to theology. However, it must not exclude any phenomenon from its coverage and must therefore provide a possible space of manifestation for the potential phenomenon of Revelation<sup>49</sup>.

Whatever differences may be added to this one, they must not, in any way, be a cause of disappointment. Possibility itself gives the measure of this potential dialog and it is structured, as we have seen, both on formal data – such as the acceptance of excess or the extensive capitalization on the category fields of grammar -, but also on content data – such as the description of man as person and icon respectively or the actual status of the one who is knowing. The phenomenology of givenness, although it cannot adhere, simply on the basis of faith, to a system of values which establishes the divinity as its center, is nevertheless ready to receive and even to understand certain coordinates of the *discourse* of Orthodoxy, even certain fundamental coordinates. On the other hand, Eastern Christianity, especially as regards the description of the person, can find in the hypostasis of the phenomenology of givenness an opportunity to bring its discourse up to date and thereby a channel for a broader distribution of its teaching.

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 326-331.

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