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Incarnation as a Prerequisite: Marion and Derrida

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INCARNATION AS A PREREQUISITE: MARION AND DERRIDA¹

RICO SNELLER

Introduction

How to avoid becoming flesh? It is this question that I want to ask of Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenological and theological treatment of the God-question. For it seems that the flesh threatens to 'contain' and circumscribe God, and thus to diminish Him. That is to say, it is the flesh that threatens to capture God. It is the flesh of Being that tends to affect his divinity. It is the flesh that lays down its own, carnal, conditions. Having God accept these conditions would degrade Him to the god we have already killed: a killing Nietzsche testifies to.

In this article I want to explore in the question of incarnation that I believe to have discerned in Marion's 'theo-phenomenology'.² Though the concept of 'incarnation' originally applies solely to Jesus Christ as the divine Word become flesh³, nothing precludes using it to refer to God revealing himself as such. Hegelian philosophy has even generalized the concept so as apparently to erase its original, historically unique materiality. Levinas, in his *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, frequently uses the term, associating it with the subject's recourse (*réurrence*) to its own, originally felt, inescapable sensibility and its irreducible capability of being addressed by the other's suffering.⁴ And the

¹ Special thanks to Dr. Ian Leask (Belfast, Queen's University) who was so kind as to review this article and to correct the English.

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² It was my consideration of the argument between Marion and Derrida that made me pay attention to it.

³ See for example Athanasius' *De incarnatione verbi*: "For this purpose, then, the incorporeal (*asomatos*) and incorruptible (*aphtartos*) and immaterial (*aúlos*) Word of God comes to our realm (*paraginetai eis ten hemeteran choran*)" "And thus taking from our bodies one of like nature..." (VIII)

⁴ "Récurrence qui est «incarnation» et où le corps par lequel le donner est possible rend *autre* sans aliéner, car cet autre est le coeur – et la bonté – du même, l'inspiration ou le psychisme même

recently deceased French phenomenologist Michel Henry goes as far as to apply the term 'incarnation' to immediate, prereflective, corporeal self-consciousness.⁵

The theological term 'incarnation' as I shall use it in the present article, will be applied in its more or less general, not necessarily christological, sense. There is incarnation, so I shall argue, where the divine reveals itself in categories that are not its own. These non-proper categories could be referred to as categories of the *flesh*. 'Flesh', then, should be taken in its metaphorical sense, as designating the opposite of the divine, *i.e.*, the immanent, worldly conditions of our human understanding. In the language of contemporary (*viz.* Heideggerian, Levinassian) philosophy, flesh comes down to the flesh of *Being*. Both the current philosophical use of the vocabulary of incarnation (Henry, Levinas) and the theological-phenomenological problematic of God revealing himself, as it has been elaborated by Marion, will hopefully justify putting forward 'incarnation' as the prime topic at stake when studying Marion with respect to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida.

I have to admit that things are extremely intricate. Certainly, we could find in Marion's texts citations which might seem to suggest very different readings from mine here (for instance, from the recent study *Phénoménologie de l'érotisme*⁶). However, I hope that, by setting up a 'virtual' encounter between Marion and Derrida, I can justify my claim. It is phenomena that reveal themselves, once they have been phenomenologically reduced. But confrontations and comparisons reveal differences. Unlike Jean-Luc Marion, I am not a phenomenologist. So I believe Marion's work to disclose itself better in confronting it with its other, than in phenomenologically reducing it only to itself.

de l'âme. La récurrence de l'ipséité – l'incarnation – loin d'épaissir et de tuméfier l'âme, l'opprime et la contracte et l'expose nue à l'autre jusqu'à faire exposer par le sujet son exposition même laquelle risquerait de le vêtir; jusqu'à se faire la découverte de Soi dans le Dire. Le sujet incarné n'est pas un concept biologique." (p.139) "En deçà de la neutralité des choses, cette passivité absolue se fait incarnation, corporéité – susceptible de douleur, d'outrage et de malheur." *Autrement qu'être...*, Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991 (1974), p.156 n.26 (*Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. by A. Lingis, The Hague/Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1982.) I have elaborated Levinas' treatment of the concept of incarnation in my *Hoe het vlees weer Woord wordt. Ethiek tussen incarnatie en desincarnatie*, Zoetermeer, Meinema, 2002, Ch. 2 (in Dutch).

⁵ *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*, Paris, Seuil, 2000.

⁶ Paris, Grasset, 2003. If Marion seems to adopt here different positions with respect to his earlier books, this might be the result of ongoing reflections upon phenomenological issues; these reflections cannot be said to have remained untouched by the work of, among others, Jacques Derrida, who has always criticized phenomenology's capital presupposition, *i.e.*, intentionality. (See for example his *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, Paris, Galilée, 2000.)

For reasons of clarity and surveyability, I will confine myself to focussing upon Marion's own explicit critique of Derrida as specified in his initial 'theological' writings (*l'Idole et la distance* and *Dieu sans l'être*). I will leave out the debate they had on the interpretation of negative theology, especially of Denys the Areopagite.⁷

To make things still more difficult, we need to reckon with a third one. A Marion-Derrida encounter cannot avoid being overshadowed by the thinking and the questions of Heidegger. It is especially Heidegger's notion of ontological difference – that is, of the radical difference between Being and beings⁸ – to which we must refer in order to be able to elucidate Marion's critique of Derrida as well as Derrida's reply to it.

So, first I will say something about Marion's critique of Heidegger. We will see that Marion rejects the Heideggerian condition imposed upon divine Revelation: the condition of having to give in to ontological difference.

Secondly, I will insist on Marion's critique of Derrida. I will try to make clear that, according to Marion, Derrida, while pretending to go behind Heideggerian ontological difference, falls back behind it. The Derridean concept of *différance*, says Marion, might be seen as just a contemporary figure of an underlying, more fundamental, *ontological* difference.

Thirdly, I will try to adopt a Derridean stance and formulate some serious questions as to Marion's theo-phenomenological project itself. In particular, I want to ask whether Marion's project avoids what I will term an 'incarnational' necessity, imposed by philosophical rigour and also inscribed within the Christian tradition.

Criticizing Heidegger: surpassing the ontological difference

Let us start by examining Marion's critique of Heidegger. This critique does not merely disclose a particular aspect among others in Marion's thinking. Rather, it entails something that is seminal and central to it. I am pointing here

⁷ See the extensive footnotes on Marion's critical comments upon Derrida's (supposed) critique of Denys the Areopagite in J. Derrida, 'Comment ne pas parler. Dénégations', in: *Psyché – Invention de l'autre*, Paris, Galilée, 1998 (1987). (Trans. 'How to avoid speaking. Denials', in: H. Coward and T. Foshay (eds.), *Derrida and Negative Theology*.) I have elucidated this debate in my *Het Woord is schrift geworden, Derrida en de negatieve theologie*, Kampen, Kok Agora, 1998, Chs. 10 and 11.

⁸ See for instance *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen, Neske Verlag, 1990 (1957) (*Identity and Difference*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, New York. London. Harper and Row). 1974 'Zur Seinsfrage', in: *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt am Main, 1978 (1967) (trans. *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. by J. Young and K. Haynes).

at the possibility of divine Revelation. The possibility of divine Revelation might very well be against the background of Marion's phenomenological enquiries – but this is why they are so interesting.

I have to admit that Marion's questioning of the ontological difference goes to the core of not only the significance of Heidegger's philosophical starting point, but also to the core of the significance and the possibilities of philosophy in general. Heidegger remains faithful to the Aristotelian definition of "first philosophy", that is, the question of Being. Unlike other sciences or other 'philosophies', *first* philosophy or metaphysics ask: what is the meaning of being in general? Whereas other sciences ask questions about this or that being *qua* historical being, or *qua* psychological, anthropological, sociological being, etc., first philosophy or metaphysics asks: what does it mean to be at all? Not: what does it mean to be this or that specific being, but just to be *at all*? Other sciences limit themselves to subsequent realms of reality, but *first* philosophy – or just: *philosophy* – ignores such a limitation. It goes further than any object-determined type of questioning may ever go.

Heidegger remains faithful to this Aristotelian distinction when he goes as far as extending even to theology the scientific feature of being neither all-embracing nor comprehensive. In his text 'Phenomenology and Theology', from 1927, Heidegger calls theology a *positive* science, a science that has its own, limited object, namely: faith. Philosophy, on the contrary, is to be considered as "*the ontological corrective of the ontical, pre-Christian content of theology's basic concepts*".⁹ Note that Heidegger does not intend to declare faith impossible or inadequate; he wants faith to take itself seriously, and thus to take seriously its own foolishness. Faith, let alone theology, cannot be seen as anything more than as an ontical interpretation. Theology fails to see its own blindness to Being itself. And whereas theology is to be seen, according to Heidegger, as a thinking of Revelation (*Offenbarung*), so – as an ontic science, a science of *ta onta*, of beings – philosophy, on the contrary, is to be considered as a thinking of revealedness or openness (*Offenbarkeit*), in other words, as a thinking of Being itself. Philosophy, Heidegger adds, remains faithful to the *Fold* (*Zwiespalt, Austrag*), that is, to a primordial difference between Being and (mere) beings, both inextricably *bound up* with each other and *coalescing* in virtue of the anterior Fold.¹⁰

⁹ 'Phänomenologie und Theologie', in: *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt, Vittorio Klostermann, 1978 (1967), p.66.

¹⁰ See for example *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen, Günter Neske, 1990 (1957); *Nietzsche I*, Stuttgart, Günther Neske, 1996 (trans. *Nietzsche*, trans. by David Farrell Krell. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

Heidegger thus commits himself entirely to philosophy, not to theology. In 1953, at a meeting with students and scholars in Hofgeismar, he says: "If I had been that much concerned by faith, I would have closed my workshop."¹¹

While reading Heidegger, we have to imagine Jean-Luc Marion, some 20 years younger than he is now, reading and re-reading Heidegger (and already reading Derrida, but we will come to that hereafter). We have to imagine Marion, not only highly fascinated by Heidegger – as everyone must be who really dares to meet Heidegger, everyone who dares to think with Heidegger, that is, to think *at all* –; we have to imagine Marion utterly vexed, too. He not only feels himself incapable of escaping Heideggerian questions, he also finds himself exasperated by the dead-end to which he sees Revelation being directed. And we need not be astonished that the critique of Heidegger by Derrida, especially of the notion of ontological difference, will not satisfy Marion at all: it makes things still worse. I shall return to this in the next section. But in order to understand Marion trying to find his way out between Heidegger and Derrida, regarding the possibility of Revelation, let us first take a very short look at his distinction between the idol and the icon. This will enable us to grasp Marion's charge of idolatry, brought against Heidegger's thinking of Being. Heidegger, according to Marion, is to be considered as idolatrous, in spite of his indictment of the Western tradition as onto-theological. Heidegger, says Marion, *remains* idolatrous. And this is a highly significant charge, worth while considering it. Shortly, we shall see that even Derrida will be treated as idolatrous, although in a negative way. (That would make him perhaps even more dangerous than Heidegger, though.)

First, though, a remark about Marion's distinction between the idol and the icon. The *idol*, according to Marion, corresponds to a certain phenomenal way in which we grasp Revelation; we grasp it in such a way that the grasped object does not reveal us God himself, but just ourselves grasping the object. The idol *reflects* the one that tries to reach beyond. It is a mirror that inhibits our self-transcending aspirations.

The *icon*, on the other hand, reveals a way of grasping Revelation in a way that roles are reversed: it is not so much that I perceive God revealing Himself; rather, it is that I perceive myself being perceived. The icon discloses an abyss;

¹¹ *Berichte aus der Arbeit der Evangelischen Akademie Hofgeismar*, Bd. 1, 1954.

it does not merely reflect the merely human, it subverts intentionality and overwhelms my glance.¹²

So much for the idol/icon distinction. Let us return once more to Heidegger and Heideggerian idolatry (as it is viewed by Marion). What does Heidegger do? According to Heidegger, he lays down conditions – ontological conditions – for God to reveal himself. God, says Heidegger, does not equal Being. God is not Being itself (as for instance Paul Tillich would say¹³): “Being and God are not identical and I would never attempt to think the essence of God by means of Being.”¹⁴ So in a way, Heidegger might be seen as prefiguring Levinas, who takes God to be otherwise than Being (*autrement qu’être*). But Heidegger adds something to this supposition that will be central to Marion’s critique of idolatry. Heidegger says: “I believe that Being can never be thought as the ground and essence of God, but that nevertheless the experience of God and of his manifestedness, to the extent that the latter can indeed meet man, flashes in the dimension of Being”¹⁵

What does all this mean? God, according to Heidegger, has to yield to ontological difference, that is, to the primordial *difference* between Being and beings. Being itself, as Heidegger teaches us, does not coincide with any *particular* being. Being always transcends beings. Being is always otherwise than even the *totality* of beings, let alone any particular being. And beings – not only stones, trees or mountains, but also our thoughts, ideas and concepts – never coincide with Being itself. None of them ever coincides with Being itself. According to Heidegger, all our ideas about Being itself remain concepts, that is, beings.

But how about God? Does He not coincide with Being itself? By no means, Heidegger says. God is not to be equated with Being. He has nothing to do with

¹² See for example *l’Idole et la distance. Cinq études*, Paris, Grasset, 1977, Ouverture and §1 (trans. *The Idol and Distance. Five Studies*, trans. and with an introduction by Thomas A. Carlson, New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); *Dieu sans l’être*, Paris, PUF, 1991, Chs. 1-3 (trans. *God without Being*, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson, with a foreword by David Tracy, Chicago: UCP, 1991); *Étant donné. Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris, PUF, 1997, pp. 319-321 (*idole*) and pp. 323-325 (*icône*) (trans. *Being Given. Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. by Jeffrey L. Kosky, Stanford/Calif.: SUP, 2002).

¹³ *Systematic Theology, I, Reason and Revelation, Being and God*, London, SCM Press, 1997 (Reprint of 1951, Chicago, CUP): “The being of God is being-itself.”, p.235.

¹⁴ ‘Zürcher Seminar. Aussprache am 6. November 1951’, in: *Martin Heidegger. Seminare. Gesamtausgabe* 15, p.436f.. Quoted by Marion, ‘La croisée de l’être’, in: *Dieu sans l’être*, p.93 (trans., p.61). Cf. also R. Kearney a.o., *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, Paris, B. Grasset, 1980.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *ib.*, (GWB, p.61)

Being. He might be called, after Levinas, other than Being. And, in this respect, Marion has little difficulty with Heidegger. The problem arises for Marion when, as he sees it, Heidegger continues implying that God cannot do without Being. Indeed, for Marion's Heidegger God cannot escape the dimension of Being *if* He wants to reveal himself. He himself might be other than Being; nevertheless, He has to adapt himself to the conditions of Being. God has to reveal himself as *a* being. He has to comply with ontological difference, in other words, with a primordial Fold unfolding itself prior to anything else taking place.

This is fully unacceptable to Marion. "It seems", he says, "that the question of 'God' never suffered as radical a reduction to the first question of Being as in the phenomenological enterprise of Heidegger."¹⁶ Somewhat further, Marion adds: "Every non-metaphysical possibility of 'God' finds itself governed from the start by the thesis (hypothesis, impediment [*hypothèque*]?) of Being that will accommodate it only as a being."¹⁷

So, the Heideggerian "thesis of Being" is an utterly unacceptable hypothesis to Marion. The thesis of Being means too heavy a burden or impediment on the possibility of Revelation, Marion holds. It hampers Revelation. It alters Revelation from the start, reducing it into something other than itself. God being other than Being, his Revelation must also circumvent Being or beingness. And for Marion, God need not comply with Being. For what does his Revelation – to be concrete: his Revelation in Christ – reveal? It reveals a divinity, Marion implies, that remains phenomenologically ambiguous.¹⁸ The pure phenomenality of Christ discloses a poor mortal dying on the cross. Purely phenomenologically speaking, it discloses a catastrophe. And it is precisely the paradox of faith, Marion says, that it has pleased God to reveal himself as a paradox. Revelation, Marion says, is the paradox that precisely humiliation and repudiation manifest the "theatre" of divine love (*agapè*). God's Revelation in Christ consists in a pure gift, better, in pure *givenness*. And precisely this givenness of Christ, Christ *as* givenness (nothing more and nothing less), makes Revelation sidestep Being, Marion says.¹⁹

¹⁶ Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, p.104; trans. p.69.

¹⁷ *Ib.*, p.105; trans. p.70.

¹⁸ Cf. Marion, *Étant donné*, p.329 n.1.

¹⁹ Marion, *l'Idole et la distance*, p.273.

Criticizing Derrida: God without being recaptured

So far, we have seen Marion's critique of the primordially of Heideggerian ontological difference. God, Marion holds, does not comply with Being. He evades it mysteriously, revealing himself in a way other than Being. Illustrating Marion's critique with the abundance of Heideggerian quotations he presents in *God without Being* would risk leading us astray. The discussion of Heidegger and the God question is a complex one, and Marion has been one of the first philosophers to have fanned this theological-philosophical fire. I have confined myself here to reproducing some of Marion's allusions to the relevant passages from Heidegger's work.²⁰

I shall now turn to the next section, and I shall try to say something about Marion's critique of Derrida. This is a crucial step in my argument, for the Derridean notion of *différance* plays on Heideggerian ontological difference, whereas Marion plays on both of these notions, subjecting both to rigorous critique. At the end of this article we shall see that Derrida returns the criticism, too, but this I shall put off for a while yet.

Let us first take a look at Derrida – that is, at Derrida interpreting Heidegger; let us then take a look at Marion trying to seek refuge in Derridean *différance*, but realising very quickly that this will not help him any further. Derridean *différance* makes things even worse, Marion affirms: it neutralises ontological difference itself, and eliminates *any* possible idea of God even before such an idea could have come to anybody's mind. We shall see that the discussion between Heidegger and Derrida, as it viewed by Marion, is about what is primordial: Heideggerian ontological difference, or Derridean *différance*. Marion, while already rejecting the ultimate decisiveness of Heideggerian ontological difference, deems Derridean *différance* still less fundamental than ontological difference. With which, as one can imagine, Derrida does not agree.

What, then, does Derrida mean by *différance*? I will try to elucidate this by pointing at Derrida's reception of Heideggerian ontological difference as it is elaborated mainly in early texts such as *De la grammatologie*²¹, 'La *différance*'

²⁰ I am referring here to Chapter 3, 'La croisée de l'être'. See, a.o., R. Kearney & J.S. O'Leary (edd.), *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, Paris, Bernard Grasset, 1980; see also H. Ott, *Denken und Sein. Der Weg Martin Heideggers und der Weg der Theologie*, Zürich, Zollicon 1959; R. Sneller, *Het Woord is schrift geworden*, 1998, Ch.11, and the wonderful thesis of H. van Veghel, *Op goddelijke grond. Heidegger over de theologische fundering van de filosofie*, Best, Damon, 1999.

²¹ Paris, Minuit, 1967; trans. *Of Grammatology*, trans. by G. Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974.

and 'Ousia et grammè. Note sur une note de *Sein und Zeit*'²². Ontological difference in Heidegger, as we have already heard, means the radical difference between Being itself and beings, the unfolding of an original coalescing Fold. Being itself, in Heidegger, does not coincide with any *particular* being. So, Derrida concludes, in his famous essay 'La différance', Being itself remains absent. The totality of beings is permeated by a radical absence: the absence of Being itself. Being itself is always postponed or deferred. That means that the *difference* between Being itself on the one hand, and beings on the other hand, can at the same time be considered as a *deferral* of Being itself. The French notion of *différance* contains both of these two meanings: difference and deferral. With the notion of *différance*, Derrida wants to point at a movement in which two processes or two operations take place simultaneously: *both* an operation of differing *and* an operation of deferring. Being itself always differs from any particular being, and that is precisely the reason why Being itself is always deferred. We can never get at Being itself. We can never take hold of it.

What holds for Being itself, Derrida adds, also holds for particular beings. If Being itself originally conceals itself, if Being itself intrinsically cannot be brought to the fore, the same follows for particular beings. Particular beings do not dispose of any positivity or identity, they are only made up of their differing of other beings. Difference precedes identity; identity itself always being deferred or on the run.²³

But let us return from beings to Being itself. If Being itself begins with being absent, if Being itself has always already been deferred because it always already differs from whatever particular being, we might consider an initial, primordial movement, called *différance*, to be prior to ontological difference. For, what exactly urges us to call the initial difference an *ontological* difference? Calling this originally felt absence 'Being', Derrida implies, does that not imply Being to be present, be it in the slightest or remotest way?²⁴ Does

²² In: *Marges – de la philosophie*, Paris, Minuit, 1972; trans.: *Margins of Philosophy*, Translated, with Additional Notes, by A. Bass, Chicago, UCP, 1982.

²³ "La différance, c'est ce qui fait que le mouvement de la signification n'est possible que si chaque élément dit «présent», apparaissant sur la scène de la présence, se rapporte à autre chose que lui-même, gardant en lui la marque de son rapport à l'élément passé et se laissant déjà creuser par la marque de son rapport à l'élément futur, la trace ne se rapportant pas moins à ce qu'on appelle le futur qu'à ce qu'on appelle le passé, et constituant ce qu'on appelle le présent par ce rapport même à ce qui n'est pas lui: absolument pas lui, c'est-à-dire pas même un passé ou un futur comme présents modifiés." *Ib.*, p.13; trans., p.13.

²⁴ Compare for instance the revealing quotation of *Zeit und Sein*, serving as a 'device' to 'Ousia et grammè. Note sur une note de *Zeit und Sein*': "Am bedrängendsten zeigt sich uns das Weitreichende

not the Heideggerian notion of ontological difference continue the Western European tradition of the forgetfulness of Being? Does not Heidegger inevitably risk to present just another example of the metaphysical tradition he had denounced so many times?

To be sure, it is the absence of Being itself that brings Derrida to the conclusion that a movement of *différance* finally has priority over *ontological* difference. Heideggerian *ontological* difference might in some way be considered as just an example of *différance*. It might in some way be considered as a determination of *différance*.²⁵ *Différance* 'itself', Derrida continues, cannot be grasped itself, as *a* self. *Différance* is nothing but its own movement. It makes us determine it *as* *différance*. It makes us determine *at all*. It makes us speak of Being itself, of beings, of entities or identities, of God, of Man, etc. When we say that *différance* is a starting point, we must realise, however, that *différance* exactly precludes anything from being a starting point. *Différance* removes itself. It can only be grasped mediately, indirectly, obliquely. It can never be fixed. Not even in a single name.²⁶

In the meantime, we might have forgotten that we are still following Jean-Luc Marion reading Derrida and trying to avoid the restraints Heideggerian ontological difference imposed upon Revelation; restraints that, as we have seen, block divine Revelation while pretending to make it possible. Does Derrida, in making ontological difference climb down, make divine Revelation climb up on the rebound? Does he give Revelation a better time than Heidegger had done earlier?

Not by any manner or means! Marion complains. On the contrary, Derrida makes things worse than ever before. Marion develops his critique of Derrida (esp. of his early text 'La *différance*') in *l'Idole et la distance* in a section entitled 'l'Autre *différant*' (the Other deferring, §18). In this section, Marion starts with taking stock of Heidegger's idolatrous imposition of conditions upon Revelation, to rapidly conclude that neither Derrida, nor Levinas offer an appro-

des Anwesens dann, wenn wir bedenken, dass auch und gerade das Abwesen durch ein bisweilen ins Unheimliche gesteigertes Anwesen bestimmt bleibt." *Ib.*, p.33; trans., p.31.

²⁵ In some way, because, as Derrida remarks, Heidegger is ready to admit that it is not the *word*, not even the *concept* of Being that ontological difference is all about (it is, Heidegger insists, the *sense* of Being). *De la grammatologie*, p.34, trans., p.21. And Derrida acknowledges that his own questioning of a *sense* of Being might already be seen as a Heideggerian questioning: "En venir à reconnaître, non pas en-deça mais à l'horizon des chemins heideggeriens, et encore en eux, que le sens de l'être n'est pas un signifié transcendantal ou trans-époqual [...] mais déjà, en un sens proprement *inouï*, une trace signifiante déterminée, c'est affirmer que dans le concept décisif de différence ontico-ontologique, *tout n'est pas à penser d'un seul trait*". *Ib.*, p.38; trans., p.23.

²⁶ Cf. 'La *différance*', in *Marges*, p.28f., trans. p.26; 'Ousia et gramma', *ib.*, p.77f.; trans., p.66.

priate way out of the dilemma (viz., either *pure* and *univocal* Revelation, but then unknowable, or *really revealed* Revelation, but then equivocal and contaminated).

As far as I can see, Marion develops two types of critique with regard to Derridean *différance*. First, he maintains that *différance* does not precede ontological difference, but that it is just another historical example or determination (epochal unfolding) of it. Secondly, Marion affirms that *différance* neutralises any God-talk or any concept of God from the outset.

Let me say something about these two different types of critique very briefly.

First, Marion claims, Derrida does not overcome ontological difference by introducing a notion of *différance*; he only reproduces it. For

rejecting the anteriority or primacy of the ontological difference presupposes nevertheless that one still attribute to the new instance the characteristic spoils of the preceding, or more, that the founding gesture reproduce, no doubt with a slight deviation, the dismissed instance.²⁷

So, *différance*, according to Marion, does not manage to liberate itself from ontological difference; it cannot avoid giving merely a contemporary appreciation of it, and a rather nihilistic one!

What does Marion mean by this? What he is implying is that Derridean (and Levinasian) terms such as *trace*, *difference* and *forgetfulness* cannot function outside the philosophical matrix of Being and beings. They cannot unfold outside the "Fold of Being" (*le Pli de l'on*), that is, the primordial difference between Being and beings. "The Fold, in its turn", Marion states, "remains, at the heart of forgetting, only inasmuch as Being and difference, remaining unrepresentable, could disappear, by the very fact that a thought obsessed by being lacks the representation of them."²⁸ The Fold cannot be escaped by taking refuge with *trace* or *différance*. Why, Marion asks, does Derrida not mention Heidegger's *Identität und Differenz*, a text, he claims, one cannot ignore when reading 'La *différance*'?²⁹ For in *Identität und Differenz*, Marion continues, Heidegger had repeatedly stated that ontological difference does not precede, but always comes together with, *any* particular differences whatsoever.

²⁷ *l'Idole et la distance*, p.289; trans. pp. 228-229.

²⁸ "Le Pli, à son tour, ne demeure, au sein de l'oubli, qu'autant que l'être et la différence, restant irréprésentables, ne sauraient disparaître, du seul fait qu'une pensée qu'obsède l'étant en manque la représentation." *Ib.*, p.287f.; trans. p.227.

²⁹ *Ib.*, p.318 n.37.

So, Marion asks rhetorically, "is it possible to differ without and before the Fold of Being itself/beings?"³⁰ This is indeed not possible. Ontological difference always precedes differences and is presupposed by them. Taking ontological difference to be just *a* difference among others, 'subordinate' to a supposedly prior *différance*, comes down to ignoring Heidegger's emphatic stipulation: ontological difference is not a genre preceding its species but it "always already" produces differences.

The second type of critique of Derridean *différance* Marion elaborates is still more stinging. Derrida, Marion proposes, relapses *behind* ontological difference. How? Because he neutralises any "distant irruption of the Father"³¹. Heidegger, to be sure, had replaced conditions upon divine Revelation. God, according to Heidegger, had to comply with Being itself and had to reveal himself as *a* being. To this, Marion had objected that Revelation circumvents Being and that it can do without Being. But it is true, Marion adds, that Heidegger had at least left open any occasion for Revelation. Derrida, he says, does not do so. By dissociating *différance* from Being, as Derrida does, he neutralises *différance*. Derrida, according to Marion, neutralises *différance* in eliminating analogy. There is no analogical resonance anymore. There is only, as Marion puts it, a "differing/deferring Neuter" in Derrida (*le Neutre différent*)³². Not only idolatry is eliminated by Derrida, Marion says, but also any other possible arrival of God, "be it with or without brackets"³³. Derrida is not even ready to admit the possibility of a paternal irruption out of a distance. He is not prepared to interpret negative theology, for instance, as a way of conceiving God without Being. He is unable to comprehend the possibility of the icon – that is, a perception of the divine in which it is not so much I who perceive, but rather I who perceive myself being perceived, I who perceive my own perception being submerged in divine depths. In short, Derridean *différance* defers any kind of Revelation. It does not even offer Revelation the opportunity to perform what it is used to performing, that is, inverting intentionality, evading Being itself, shedding light on something other than Being itself. According to Marion, Revelation sidesteps Being, and thereby remains indifferent to the operations of not only ontological difference, but also *différance*.

³⁰ *Ib.*, p.288.

³¹ *Ib.*, p.291.

³² *Ib.*

³³ *Ib.*

Différance [...] therefore eliminates the thought of the 'God' being. But all theology as well finds itself assimilated to onto-theology [...]. It then becomes easy and logical to eliminate any other God, since onto-theology here exhausts all theology [...] The differing/deferring Neuter eliminate beyond that idol, any other advent of God (with or without quotation marks).³⁴

It is not difficult to identify Marion's fear as he reads Derrida. Marion is fearful of absolute indifference, in which nothing takes precedence over something else anymore. He is afraid of absolute neutrality and relativity, of 'the night in which all cows are black'.

Différance fills its depth in renouncing any 'transcendental absolutely' and extends its differing/deferring indifference to the infinite polysemy of differences. Everything, indifferently, is organized in a differing / deferring system (in the sense of desiring machines). In this semantic-less polysemy, no dominance (among others, of a supreme being, or of beings) remains susceptible to privilege, since none of the differences that would render it possible maintains the least surplus over the others.³⁵

We will see whether Marion's fear is justified.

Criticized by Derrida: God without being 'it'

I come to my final section. First I will try to give a Derridean answer to Marion's critique. Then I shall attempt to invert the criticisms outlined here and turn them towards Marion himself.

Does Derrida take up the gauntlet that has been thrown down by his opponent, Jean-Luc Marion? I think he had already done it, even before having been challenged by Marion. For, in his early essay 'La différence', he had in fact asked the same question as Marion had, that is, can *différance* indeed be seen as just another epochal unfolding of ontological difference (as it is regarded by Marion)? In a way, Derrida admits, *différance* can: "In a certain aspect of itself, *différance* is certainly but the historical and epochal *unfolding* of Being or of the ontological difference. [...] And yet, are not the thought of the *meaning* or *truth* of Being, the determination of *différance* as ontico-ontological difference, difference thought within the horizon of the question of *Being*, still intra-metaphysical effects of *différance*?"³⁶

Is Derrida giving in here to ultimate undecidability: *either* priority of *différance* or of ontological difference? Does he take just the opposite stance as regards

³⁴ *Ib.*, pp. 291, 292; trans. p.231f.

³⁵ *Ib.*, p.285; trans. p.225.

³⁶ 'La différence', in *Marges*, p.23; trans., p.22.

Marion's point that determining ontological difference as *différance* might be considered as just a new, nihilistic, say, post-modern self-determination of Being itself as *différance*?

No, Derrida does not, I think. For, the most essential point in his analysis still has to follow: "Since Being has never had a «meaning», has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings, then *différance*, in a certain and very strange way, (is) «older» than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being."³⁷

So, what is crucial here to Derrida is the primordial *absence of sense*, the *absence of a sense of Being*. What makes Heidegger interpret this absence – an absence of the Other – as an absence of *Being*? Why should it be *Being* that is to conceal itself in its ontological or metaphysical determinations? Does this not imply being trapped by analogism? Does this not imply remaining faithful to ontotheology – that is, to determining the Other in terms of particular beings?

It would be very interesting to look at Derrida's own way of coping with the Other – that is, to look at Derrida looking at the ways in which the other is coping with us, with our world, with the text or the texture of our world. For Derrida does not grow fixed upon *not* determining the Other; he grows fixed upon *not determining* the Other, upon *not* letting the Other have the initiative of the way it discloses itself. It would be very interesting to explore this point, but we cannot pursue it further here.

So let us re-envisage Marion's critique of Derrida. Marion's point that *différance* can be ultimately reduced once more to ontological difference is only partly adequate; finally, it cuts no ice. But how about Marion's remark that Derridean *différance* neutralises any idea of God from the start? How about his suggestion that, in *this* respect at least, we would be better off with Heidegger, who leaves open the possibility of Revelation? Derrida is not explicit on this. He just says that *différance* is not God, not even the God of negative theology.³⁸ But does *différance* neutralise, and so exclude, any idea of God revealing Himself? What does *différance* do? It differs and it defers. It would make any possible Revelation differ from the Revealed, and henceforth defer the Revealed. But does that come up to a neutralisation? This differing/deferring 'principle', if I may say so, would rather make one wonder. It rather keeps us in tension. I would say that it definitely *precludes* neutralisation. On the one hand: does not any Revelation lead to idolatry, even when it is treated as

³⁷ *Ib.*, trans. p.22.

³⁸ *Ib.*, p.6; trans. p.6.

an icon? But on the other hand: does the inevitability of idolatry imply neutrality or indifference? Not at all. In Derrida, it implies tension, responsibility, *becoming* an individual, even while individuality, responsibility and tension will inevitably be absorbed by neutrality or indifference. But the tension of *différance*, in Derrida, has priority over neutrality, just as responsibility has priority over indifference.³⁹

So far a possible Derridean reply to Marion's critique. But now the onus of proof may be inverted and rested, as I said, on Marion himself. At least some serious questions might be asked, not without, of course, mentioning at the same time the utter respect we owe to Marion and to his philosophy. So let us try and see whether Marion himself might be interrogated by Derrida.

God without Being: can God do without Being? Yes, Marion says, because His way of revealing Himself is through the icon. The icon, I repeat, is a way of revealing in which it is the perceiver who perceives himself being perceived. Intentionality is reversed. Of course, there remains intentionality. Of course, there is perception of a perceived object. But this intentional perception does not perceive the essence. Phenomenology as such cannot grasp Revelation *as* Revelation. What conscience grasps is a poor mortal dying on the cross. It grasps a being in its beingness. But it does not grasp – at least not intentionally – itself being grasped. God moves in a mysterious way, that is, in reversing intentionality He eludes Being. Being is not necessary for Him to reveal himself. His divinity does not depend upon ontological features.

So what is the use of Being at all? Does not the whole project of God revealing himself to man in the icon of Christ finally risk altering Being, phenomenology, intentionality etc., into a useless and senseless detour? Does not the mysteriousness, beinglessness, *fleshlessness*, *desincarnateness* of God's history still throw up theodicy-problems, problems that concern precisely 'Being', 'Flesh', 'Incarnatedness' etc.?

These questions are mine, but they are inspired by Derrida. Derrida could perhaps teach us that the Word *has to* – indeed, *must* – become flesh.⁴⁰ And taking this seriously, taking *incarnation* seriously, might imply that considering the flesh – the flesh of Being, or however it may be determined – only as an obstacle that is irrelevant to the revealedness of the divine phenomenon, would

³⁹ The 'concept' of *différance* is close to the Derridian concept of *decision*. I have tried to confront the latter with the concept of 'incarnation' in my *Hoe het vlees weer Woord wordt*.

⁴⁰ Cf. my *Het Woord is schrift geworden*, 'Slotbeschouwing'.

mean not taking *incarnation* seriously at all. In his early essay on Levinas, 'Violence et métaphysique', Derrida writes: "[I]t is impossible [...] to respect [the Other] in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not appear for an Ego (in general). One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other, if there was not a phenomenon of the totally other, or *evidence* of the totally other as such."⁴¹

God has to comply with Being. This is Derrida's lesson, and in fact it might be considered as already Heidegger's lesson. Incarnation is a prerequisite that Marion risks not to take seriously enough. For, would not leaving God entirely other, would not trying to keep his alterity undamaged, hand Him over to the *worse* violence? I mean, the *worse* violence of ultimate speculation, fanaticism, zealotry and sectarianism? To quote Derrida once more: "[I]f one does not uproot the silent origin from itself violently, if one decides not to speak, then the worst violence will silently cohabit the *idea* of peace?"⁴² Derrida means, I think, that leaving God – or the Other – within the brackets of his alterity, insulating Him from being phenomenologically incarnate, would diminish his alterity and make it turn into his complete opposite, that is, into pure immanence. A God without Being risks to be God without being '*it*' (that is, a God that is not God), that is, to be a God that is not God anymore.⁴³

To be sure: becoming incarnate does not eliminate the problems that *différance* had evoked and to which Marion had been so sensitive. Any incarnation is susceptible of being neutralized, and *will* indeed be neutralized. Divinity or alterity will always be deferred, and not one flesh in the world will be able to retain alterity, let alone to domesticate it, in concepts, ideas, theologemes or philosophemes, in ecclesiastical structures or in sacramental objects.

That is why I think that the flesh must never be overestimated. Marion seems to be very well aware of this, and we might take this for granted and let him teach us this. But underestimating the flesh could even be worse: it might hand us over to the *worse* violence. Truth is in the middle, as already Aristotle had remarked, but, as this 'middle' is a place of tension, truth itself can never be detected properly. If this tension turns into paralysis, it is no tension anymore. It is proper to tension to paralyse paralysis itself, and not to let tension be captured by paralysis. The same goes for truth, the truth that has to be looked for in the tensional middle, and not in paralysis.

⁴¹ *l'Écriture et la différence*, p.181; trans. *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, UCP, 1978, p.123.

⁴² *Ib.*, p.220; trans. p.148.

⁴³ Cf. Derrida, 'Comment ne pas parler. Dénégations', in: *Psyché*, p.540, n.1; trans., p.133 n.3.

It would go too far to elaborate here the ways in which incarnation might be detected without it being neutralized. The answer Marion gives, as far as I know, seems a bit too hesitant. In *Étant donné* he suggests that phenomenology, though never able to judge the revelational qualities of a supposed revealed phenomenon (for instance, of Christ), should never exclude the possibility of Revelation. Phenomenology, he continues, should even go as far as to *redefine* the transcendental conditions of phenomenality, in order to allow for revelational phenomena.⁴⁴ For me, this is too little. In my recent book on incarnation and the idea of an absolute Good, I have suggested that only individual, personal engagement in the incarnational process might afford the required revelational evidence.⁴⁵ To put it in Marion's own terms: my perceiving of myself *being* perceived by the icon should engage me in the 'project' of the perceived icon. I should take my own responsibility and thereby supply the only possible and thinkable proof of the truth of the revealed phenomenon. This engagement and its truth are *ethical*, not epistemological, let alone dogmatical.

But Marion, I suppose – and I might be wrong – remains too much of a phenomenologist to pay much attention to ethics. And phenomenology might run the risk of ethical oblivion. Derrida does not. In putting incarnational necessity on the philosophical agenda, Derrida draws our attention towards the inevitability of the flesh as regards the Other or Alterity. And with Derrida's insistence on personal responsibility or on individual engagement, he suggests an *ethical* way in which the neutralizing effects of the flesh could be met. Nevertheless, it is Marion who has had the philosophical courage to reintroduce God in philosophy. "Dare to confess God among the philosophers": in these words, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in an age of philosophical materialism and atheism, exhorted his pupil Emile. Jean-Luc Marion is one of those rare modern philosophers who have testified to this courage.

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⁴⁴ "Si la Révélation de Dieu comme se montrant à partir de lui-même peut avoir jamais lieu de fait, il faut que la phénoménologie redéfinisse ses propres limites et apprenne à les dépasser suivant ses procédures nettes et rigoureuses, c'est-à-dire qu'elle dessine l'une de ses figures possibles comme un paradoxe des paradoxes, saturé d'intuition au second degré, en un mot phénomène de révélation." *Étant donné*, p.336.

⁴⁵ Cf. my *Hoe het vlees weer Woord wordt*.