

## The Paradox of God's Divinity in the Context of Jean-Luc Marion and Thomas Aquinas

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to present how God, for Jean-Luc Marion, is both related and contrasted with the views of the Thomistic interpretation of His essence. There have been two distinctions of God created by the traditional metaphysics—first, His physical essence and second, His metaphysical essence. In addition, this paper attempts to give an analysis on both philosophical thoughts. The traditional metaphysical interpretation of the existence and essence of God is something that Marion challenges in his book *God Without Being*. Marion attempts to absolutely free God from the reduction of His infinity into a finite being more comprehensible by man. The four theological themes are namely the *distance*, *icon*, *gift*, and the *love*, all of which are interrelated. With the implication of the four themes that Marion proposes, the Thomistic view creates a problem-- through fitting God in man's language, it limits His capability as a higher being knowing that He is even beyond man's determination of such. In addition, Marion also sees that defining God is *limiting the infinite being's capacity* to be. Caging God's being into man's concept is similar to defining what the Supreme is himself, contrary to the fact that man can never know God without Him showing himself to man. It is also definite that the common ground for this comparison is that both agree on the *infinitude* of the Supreme Being. This paper intends to end by demonstrating how Marion's four theological elements are essential in our attempt to further grasp the Supreme.

**Keywords:** Distance, Icon, God, Marion, Aquinas

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Before Aristotle established *Metaphysics*, man has already inquired about the creator of everything. We can thus say that discourses on the divine being have been a classical subject to talk about. Different perspectives arose about the Divine's "beingness". The divine has formed part in different mythological creatures before finally settling

into calling the divine being as "God". Through time, God has become a symbol that man seeks help from in time of his need. God

then, therefore becomes someone's needs according to how He is needed.<sup>1</sup>

The problem that Marion observed in this context was that man kept on putting God in definitions that man sees fitting. Marion asserts that God should not be thought of as the conventional classification "Being"<sup>2</sup>, for that decreases God to a very human idea which he calls "Dieu". In a sense, a violence is done to God and our understanding of God, for we delimit that which by nature is indeterminable - God.<sup>3</sup> Marion provokes man to think about God not as a being but beyond it.

Both philosophers clash even though both fight for God to be known. Marion claims God as *causa sui*, since He caused being itself, Marion sees God beyond being. Similarly, Aquinas' second proof of God's existence, he describes God as the ultimate cause of reality. However, since Aquinas also argued using *via negativa*, Marion opposes to its use because God's definition therefore becomes ambiguous. Through the use of *via negativa* God becomes vulnerable to be interpreted in vain.

The traditional metaphysics<sup>4</sup> conceded with the idea that our knowledge of God is limited, Thomas Aquinas recognizes the

difficulties that entails with understanding the divine being.<sup>5</sup> However this does not necessarily mean we should be evasive about God's being. Thus we, while still recognizing the impossibility of the task, should make ends meet through reconciling what finite beings know about the Supreme.

## THE THOMISTIC VIEW OF GOD'S BEING

In Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, he inquires about the names of God. Similarly with Marion, Aquinas agrees that God is above being named since God's essence is above all that we understand about God. On the contrary, we name God through our natural conception of Him since it is the peak of our natural ability to signify Him. Aquinas therefore uses natural reasoning to argue about God since it is where men are commonly grounded wherefore man can talk about God where both could understand the discourse.

The metaphysical perfection of God talks about the attributes that is distinct from (and beyond) the beings' attributes.<sup>6</sup> We predicate God with attributes that transcend all his other perfections could be called as the *metaphysical essence* of God. For example we call

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Egypt's Sphinx or Nietzsche's *Übermensch* wherein man has become like God.

<sup>2</sup> God is seen as all-too perfect without knowing the perfection of God himself.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Calcagno, "God and the Caducity of Being: Jean-Luc Marion and Edith Stein on Thinking God," 20th WCP: God and the Caducity of Being: Jean-Luc Marion and Edith Stein on Thinking God., accessed July 29, 2017, <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Reli/ReliCalc.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> God can be identified into two properties: the physical essence the metaphysical essence. The former discusses what entails the simple identity that we attribute with God. The latter on the other hand, talks about God as a subsisting being.

<sup>5</sup> Peter S. Eardley and Carl N. Still, *Aquinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2010), 23-24.

<sup>6</sup> Henri Grenier, *Thomistic Philosophy*, trans. J. P. E. O'Hanley (Charlottetown, Canada: St. Dunstan's University, 1948), 294.

God as the infinite being, we predicate God with the context that he is beyond quantities and qualities—God encompasses beyond what is comprehensible by the man’s intellect. Such is possible since Aquinas argues corporeal names are applied to God in a metaphorical sense only since He is incorporeal.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, the traditional metaphysics would attribute God as an infinite being for we—the creatures are the effects of God<sup>8</sup>. Both are in its physical and metaphysical essence. First, on the physical essence, man describes God as a perfect being, and because of God’s creation, man is formed out of his goodness (thus our being follows as good as well). On the other hand, God is attributed as “infinite”, in its metaphysical essence, all beings God has created acts on God’s effect which is infinite as well—since God’s creations could not be quantified nor comprehended by man’s limited capacity to know.

## MARION’S VIEW OF GOD AS WITHOUT BEING

For Jean-Luc Marion, man limits God with what man can comprehend it with. To speak of God in traditional metaphysical language is inadequate to such task.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Marion wants distance for man to recognize the supremacy of God by

accepting God’s transcendence from nature and know that He is subsisting himself. Marion thus, seeks an appropriate metaphysical language for us to use (may it be philosophical or theological). He wanted a language that talks about God in an *iconic* manner instead of *idolatrous*.<sup>10</sup> The philosophy of Marion was deeply concerned with finding God a fit language<sup>11</sup>; a language that does not negate Him but looks for a new name for God but discover God to His own accord. He sees the problem with the use of analogy as a way of describing God. Since Thomas Aquinas mentioned the use of analogy and proportion<sup>12</sup> as means to know God, Marion aims to do away with the method. Through his four theological themes he has come up with his version to discuss about God—a God free from language understood by man but understood by those who seek to know Him.

Although some of them try to escape metaphysics or reject traditional idols of God, all of them either institute new idols<sup>13</sup> or do not exceed the old ones sufficiently or successfully. In Marion’s more theological works, he therefore attempts to outline such an overcoming himself by formulating a kind of language about God that would escape metaphysical

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<sup>7</sup> Kevin Knight, "Question 13. The names of God," *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE: The names of God (Prima Pars, Q. 13)*, 2013., accessed July 30, 2017, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1013.htm#article 1>.

<sup>8</sup> Eardley and Still, *Aquinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Christina M. Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>12</sup> Eardley and Still, *Aquinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> New idols were that of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* or Heidegger’s *Dasein*.

constrictions and speak of God more adequately.<sup>14</sup>

## THE FOUR THEOLOGICAL THEMES OF MARION

Since Marion deals with the refusal of idolatrous descriptions of God thus he came up with the *Icon*. Marion concedes with the idea that there has been a definite essence of God that the metaphysical language has created; however the problem was because of the description, God was limited. The icon that Marion proposes goes beyond *gazing*, it transcends beyond what is just merely a representation. The icon *sees*, moreover the icon invites us to see while it sees us. The icon preserves God's transcendence for it refuses the mirroring function (*gazing*) of the idol.<sup>15</sup> In his example we see that we gaze upon what is in front of us, however it limits its representation and blocks the wholeness of God. Through the icon, we discover the distance between God and man. The distance however is not a bad thing since because of the distance we recognize that we are indeed connected to God.<sup>16</sup> Insofar as the distance is concerned, for Marion, it is necessary since it 'protects the identity of God' as an unfathomable being however it does not limit our capability to take a little step closer to God.<sup>17</sup> The question lies within, if God is therefore distant, how do we know Him?<sup>18</sup>

Marion imposes thus of the *Gift*. Remember that God was first described in terms that man could talk about (example would be "goodness, perfection, etc).<sup>19</sup> Since we keep on giving God a label, through *kataphatic*<sup>20</sup> way, Marion insists that it was inappropriate. We should also remember that God for Marion is incomprehensible with the ideas [of God] of the human mind alone. Marion poses the idea that through the Gift—we find ourselves. Because of man's attempt to know God, God gave us the gift to identify ourselves. This is the gift. We cannot speak of God, we cannot even comprehend to come close to the distance itself; however the gift makes us know more about ourselves that helps us know a piece about God.<sup>21</sup> The gift makes the representation of the invisible become visible. A great example of such concept is God's act coming down from his divinity to immerse Himself with the man to save humanity from sin. He humbled himself and faced the life of a finite. God's redemption of humanity from sin is a gift that makes God known; God lets himself comprehensible with man. He puts himself vulnerable with the distance however he lets it be. God is beyond words however God defied it as well by putting God's divinity away and instead, shared God's grace with the humanity. God's nature was to love.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Gschwandtner, Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics, 130.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>20</sup> In the words of Dionysian theology, describing God with terms that are all perfect (goodness, powerful, omnipotent).

<sup>21</sup> Gschwandtner, Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics, 139.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph S. O'Leary, "The Theological Significance of Jean-Luc Marion's Thought," Joseph S.

Thus, in order for us to receive God's gift we have to accept it with *love*. According to Marion, love is the only way we understand the gift of God, it is by which we are able to grasp the abundance [the excess] that the gift of God has brought forth.<sup>23</sup> Love is transcendent among all comprehensible things, such that it is the language appropriate to speak with God of.<sup>24</sup> God's love for us is overflowing it is uncontainable. Since love is boundless, it is indeed fit for such to talk about God. Through charity we free God from all metaphysical language of his so-called being.<sup>25</sup> Through love, it mediates us to empty oneself for us to be filled with the excess or the gift that God is offering to man.<sup>26</sup>

We might ask why Marion suggested the name Love or Charity as the name of God? We could imply the famous saying "God is love". According to Marion, Love overcomes being and renders it insignificant.<sup>27</sup> Through *love* the distance of God and man is reduced since we experience God through it.

## INFINITUDE: THE SIMILARITY

In the traditional metaphysics, God has always been considered as the infinite entity. Through Thomas Aquinas, he brought about the concept of *Via Negativa*, identifying what God is and what God is not reducing, therefore, the quantities that invalidates His perfection. The same thing goes as well with

Marion, he told us of the *saturated phenomena*.<sup>28</sup> Both attempted to tackle the impossibility of man to know God. The distinction lies in the middle, the traditional metaphysics talked about God in the words comprehensible for mankind, while Marion gave reasons why we cannot comprehend God's infinitude; he however, proposed a language that both man and God can understand—charity<sup>29</sup>.

There is still this point that remains for the paradigm of the traditional metaphysics and that is we cannot deny not to use analogy for praising God. In that sense that is how we, humans, acclaim God's perfection so we cannot be not be guilty of it. The problem is will that be part of Marion's argument that we limit God of earthly language? Marion was criticized for that.

While Marion wants to free the divine from restrictions, he actually limits and confines any notion of revelation... The coming of Revelation in fact loses its capacity ever to disturb the discipline—Phenomenology, just because it has become such an apt instrument for describing a God beyond measure, become God's measure.<sup>30</sup>

The comparison lies again in its common ground however this time it is for the traditional metaphysics. Marion proposed the

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O'Leary Homepage, January 7, 2006, accessed December 03, 2016, [http://josephsoleary.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/2006/01/the\\_theological.html](http://josephsoleary.typepad.com/my_weblog/2006/01/the_theological.html).

<sup>23</sup> Gschwandtner, Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics, 141.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

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

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>28</sup> The "excess".

<sup>29</sup> "Love".

<sup>30</sup> Gschwandtner, Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics, 153.

idea of God doing away with divinity to share<sup>31</sup> his gift to us. However, does that mean that the divine essence of God lessens because he stooped down to the level of human beings? Knowing that the Thomistic God is the God of perfection—nothing is impossible. Thus it is right to deny that his divinity or infinitude becomes less since God is God. God can never be the same with our genus even if he sacrificed divinity for us. It only goes to show his infinitude—proving the *impossible*.<sup>32</sup>

God is unique (absolutely one) in as much as the divine nature does not admit of any other being similar to itself either in species or in genus. The angelic nature admits of other beings similar to it in genus, but not in species: God alone does not admit of another being similar in genus.<sup>33</sup>

Marion also has his take on account for the possibility of impossibility. He concedes that it is true if we speak of God's possibility to do the impossible however man is wrong to say that God is described in a language only man can understand since it limits God's infinite quantity.

Marion therefore argues that God becomes “defined by impossibility as such” and begins where the possible for us ends... For God, nothing is

impossible. Nothing, therefore, can make God impossible.<sup>34</sup>

## GOD'S PERFECTION

We keep on reiterating that God is perfect thus he cannot be spoken of or through human thoughts only, we forget thus of what perfection means.<sup>35</sup> For Thomas Aquinas (the side of traditional metaphysics), we just keep on stating the material form that we objectify God with. There is more to God than just the definitions we impose.<sup>36</sup> In a way we see that they have the same argument with Marion.

Let us just reiterate that Marion stressed out that no names can be attributed to God but love, he replaced *causa sui*<sup>37</sup> with *charity* for the reason that Marion finds it more fitting since love loves without any condition whatsoever. Both philosophers grasped the idea that God is never fitting for any language that we resort to what we can attribute to him even though it may seem as though it is an understatement. The beauty of God lies within what we can speak of, however we should not remain stagnant nor should we be stoic about it just because we cannot find any word fitting for God.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> In Marion's terms to share is “agape” wherein we participate as well in the gift that God offers us, and we accept the gift through and through with love.

<sup>32</sup> Impossible (includes becoming one with the Humans, saving humanity through His death and resurrection) proves of his divine nature since such attribute is only accounted for God alone.

<sup>33</sup> Grenier, *Thomistic Philosophy*, 301.

<sup>34</sup> Gschwandtner, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics*, 159.

<sup>35</sup> Ceniza R. Claro and Abulad E. Romualdo, *Introduction to Philosophy* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2001), pp. 116-117.

<sup>36</sup> Grenier, *Thomistic Philosophy*, 294.

<sup>37</sup> “being”.

<sup>38</sup> Eardley and Still, *Aquinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 25.

## CONCLUSION

We saw God as someone who caused everything that is why God is relevant. God is necessary since God is the root of every being that affected all its constituents. God was described first by Thomas Aquinas as the *Causa Sui* or being. A being that entails all infinitudes that man describes with God. God for the traditional metaphysics is the God of perfection; the being that has infinite *goodness* that we may acclaim for such.

As time progresses, Marion enters by denying the metaphysical attributes of God. Conceding that God is an infinite being, therefore God must not be limited with the human language. Through his four motifs, he addresses the problem of how are we going to name the iconic God. He first established the distance for man to realize that man is connected with God, through the icon God reveals himself by the use of the Gift. However the Gift that God offers are so much that man cannot confine it ourselves, there enters the fourth motif—love. Love is the container of the saturated phenomena or the excess.

Then Marion concluded that to speak of God we must use his language, charity. Since through charity, we see that God manifests himself “iconically” by showing his infinitude, though uncontainable, we can talk of it for it is subject to understanding God’s knowledge.

Both conformed to the knowledge of incomprehensibility of God’s identity, but the traditional metaphysics attempted to speak of God as being simply because God is the center

of beings thus he is necessary, and we should not be silent about it. For Marion, he attempted to know how to grasp (since he conceded that man’s rationality alone cannot comprehend God’s identity) God’s gift—his identity, the icon.

Metaphysics thus, do not hinder our ability to know something about the divine being. Moreover it helps us to know who we really are—what our identity is as a being. The icon that Marion talks about helps us to know and grasp our identity. Perhaps to know ourselves, we can know more about God knowing that he is the cause of all beings, and we all have ourselves a piece of God.

Metaphysics in its classical sense brings us closer to the study of Beings and its creators but it is also the influence of modern metaphysics through Marion to say that it is the other way around. God brings us closer to itself. It was possible to know and figure out ourselves because metaphysics taught us so.

God’s power is beyond limits; God’s love is beyond our words. God’s divinity, infinitude, his essence are all nothing compared to God’s identity. We only have a piece of God’s attributes, there is more to that than what we know. The important thing here is that we have come to know our roots and our root is Love. An infinite abstract thing that helps us enjoy and share it with other beings that God has provided us with. And for that it is necessary for him to be praised, not with language that we know, but transcend it with other beings so that they may see themselves with the identity of the icon—charity.

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