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The Transcendence of Flesh, Divine and Human

James E. Faulconer

Abstract: *In this essay, James E Faulconer confronts an age-old issue that seems to divide Latter-day Saint Christians from other Christians, namely, "what it means to say that God is transcendent and embodied." Early Christians also believed that God is embodied and transcendent, but with important differences in how that seemingly paradoxical combination of assertions can be explained. In his brilliant analysis, Faulconer shows how God "transcends us because He is embodied."*

[**Editor's Note:** Part of our book chapter reprint series, this article is reprinted here as a service to the LDS community. Original pagination and page numbers have necessarily changed, otherwise the reprint has the same content as the original.

See James E. Faulconer, "The Transcendence of Flesh, Divine and Human," in "*To Seek the Law of the Lord*": *Essays in Honor of John W. Welch,* ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 113–34. Further information at https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-seek-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/.]

Talk of transcendence is common in theology. In traditional theologies God transcends this world: as the Creator of all that is, he is not part of his creation; the Creator is radically other than Creation, sufficiently so that for traditional theologies it is a question whether the term *existence* can properly be applied to him. According to some

contemporary thinkers it may not make sense to say that God exists.[1] This does not mean individuals who subscribe to traditional theologies doubt whether there is a God, but that they wonder, given God's transcendence, how well the language that applies to created beings can be applied to their Creator, if at all. If we say that created beings exist, then whatever we say of God, it seems odd, they suggest, to apply the same term, *exists,* to the Creator of those beings. Of course few Latter-day Saints believe in a God who transcends the world in that way. Believing in an embodied God makes it difficult, if not impossible, to believe that God is metaphysically distinct from the physical and temporal world. God cannot be as absolutely other-than-the-world for Latter-day Saints as he is for most other believers.[2]

As a result, one of the common accusations against Latter-day Saints by other Christians is that we are engaged in a kind of idolatry by worshipping something that is less than God, something created rather than the Creator himself. That charge carries more weight than Latter-day Saints are wont to think. It is not enough simply to assert that we cannot conceive of an unembodied entity; that begs the question and could be explained by lack of imagination. More is needed by way of argument. David Paulsen has done much of the heavy lifting to get our response started; especially by showing that belief in an embodied God was not foreign to first-century Christianity.[3]

I will add to that conversation by considering what it might mean to say that God is transcendent and embodied. Latter-day Saints sometimes say that God is transcendent, but we don't mean that he is metaphysically transcendent, so it is not clear what we mean. I have elsewhere argued that Latter-day Saints can ascribe a kind of transcendence to God, using the term transascendence to distinguish our belief from that of the tradition.[4] Transascendence isn't merely superlative being, with God

1 See, for example, Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 41–47 in particular.

2 Of course, this does not mean that there are not significant differences between human and divine being; differences that raise important questions for understanding. See James E. Faulconer, "Divine Embodiment and Transcendence: Propaedeutic Thoughts and Questions," *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–14.

3 David L. Paulsen, "Early Christian Beliefs in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses," *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 105–16, with "Reply to Kim Paffenroth's Comment," *Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993): 235–39. See also "Must God Be Incorporeal?" *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 76–87.

4 James E. Faulconer, "Transascendence: Transcendence in Mormon Thought," in *Mormonism at the Crossroads of Philosophy and Theology: Essays in Honor of David L.*

being the most of whatever category properly describes him. Rather, I argue, we can understand divine transcendence as like the transcendence of other persons who are other than ourselves and to whom we have moral and ethical obligations (as "higher" than ourselves), yet we can avoid reducing God to just another, though superior, human person by recognizing that the analogy of human and divine otherness does not necessarily mean that human being and divine being are identical. That God is our Creator makes his being qualitatively different than ours even if it is in important respects also the same as ours. Like early Christians, we assert that God is both embodied and transcendent in some sense, though our theological explanations of that combination of assertions is different than early believers.

The earliest Christian theologies emerged in the tensions between Christianity and Greek metaphysics. At the beginning of Christianity in Europe, Western philosophy was marked by the idea of a radical separation between the sensible and the intelligible, an inheritance from Greek thought. Though early Christian thinkers often found philosophy useful for reflecting on their beliefs, Christianity denied that radical separation. The early Church Fathers insisted that Jesus Christ was a living, breathing human being, not only divine but also mortally incarnate; the Church Fathers fought against the philosophical interpretation of Jesus according to which his being is incompatible with incarnation. In spite of the tensions with Greek ontology, they insisted that "the Word became human."[5] Yet because of that tension theology and philosophy have long interpreted materiality poorly; in particular they have often (though not always) misconstrued human bodily existence. The result has generally been the postulation of the metaphysical world over against which this world stands or, more lately, the claim that everything is reducible to the movements of material particles. (These are two sides of the same, mistaken assumptions.) But that philosophico-theological story, the one so trenchantly criticized by Nietzsche, obscures the parallel Christian story in which we learn that flesh is the revelation of the Word and that salvation comes *in the flesh* (resurrection). The philosophical and scientific story obscures the Jewish and Christian story that has run along beside it for millennia, namely

Paulsen, ed. Jacob Baker (Salt Lake City: Gregg Kofford, 2012), 235–54. I take the word *transascendence* from Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969), 35. Levinas gets the word from Jean Wahl and Gabriel Marcel.

5 Michel Henry, *Incarnation. Une Philosophie de la Chair* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 18.

the outrageous claim of John 1:14: "The Word became flesh."[6] But it has not effaced that other story.

The Judeo-Christian story has not been effaced by the philosophical tradition because we do not hear or tell the two kinds of story in the same way. When John announces that Jesus is the Word, obviously he is not telling us that there is some propositional content to which Jesus corresponds. But neither is this merely metaphor (if anything could be merely metaphor). Jesus himself is the Event of Revelation. In his person, being who he is in the way that he is, *he* is what God has to say. John surely has the Hebraic-Aramaic understanding of *word* in mind when he writes, and in Hebrew *dbr* (דבר), the word to which the Greek most likely corresponds, "indicates primarily the activity of speaking, the production of words and phrases."[7] Similarly, the Greek *logos* (λόγος) refers primarily to spoken expression rather than its content. The philosophical story is a story about content. In contrast, the Jewish and Christian stories are about events, and the Christian story is about the Event, namely the announcement of the Messiah by his appearance amongst us. This is why Michel Henry argues that the truth of Christianity is not revealed philosophically, because that truth is not a truth in the order of narrowly conceived rational thought.[8]

Philosophy has obscured the Jewish and Christian stories, but it need not do so. To understand better how the philosophical story can be told in a way that highlights, in particular, the Christian one, consider the philosophical one again. The first clue comes from Aristotle who points out that there is neither pure form nor pure material. There is no form that is not the form of something or other, something material. Likewise no material thing appears without form. Both material and form are useful mental constructs for thinking about things, but we must not forget that they are fictive. They are terms we have created to help us think about things rather than things themselves. Further, to speak of material is not only to speak of particles or wave patterns through points in space. As the work of Martin Heidegger argued almost 100 years ago, materiality and flesh are both more than just matter; they both entail relationship and context.[9] As a result, much contemporary philosophy

6 Henry, *Incarnation*, 25.

7 Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), s.v. דָּבָר

8 Henry, *Incarnation*, 16.

9 I have in mind primarily his first major work, *Being and Time* (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh and Dennis J. Schmidt [Albany: SUNY, 2010]). There his understanding of human being in terms of location, as *Dasein* understood

is concerned with how to understand excess, that is, how to think about what exceeds mere material when material is viewed only as particles or waves in space-time. The question is how we can think about or conceive of that which exceeds what we can call "bare materiality." How do we do that without invoking the metaphysical transcendence that devalues our incarnate existence in favor of some ultimately unknowable realm? How do we avoid the Nietzschean criticism of Christianity?

Philosophical responses to that question, the question of excess, are not uncommon in philosophy today, especially outside of the Anglo-American world. And in an age of Levinas, Derrida, and Marion it is easy to forget that the thought of transcendence as excess rather than metaphysical transcendence has been part of the contemporary philosophical tradition since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. We see it in Husserl's *Logical Investigations,* and Stanley Cavell sees it in Wittgenstein. Purportedly, the mostly French contemporary thinkers who address the question using the term *excess* show us the limits of knowledge, namely, that we are inextricably trapped within language. Few lines of twentieth-century philosophy have been so often quoted (or so much misunderstood) as Jacques Derrida's "There is nothing outside the text," which seems to imply not only skepticism, but linguistic nihilism.

As Emmanuel Levinas has recognized, there is some warrant to the conclusion that the end of the chain of thought from Heidegger through late twentieth-century French thinkers is skepticism: "Philosophy is not separable from skepticism, which follows it like a shadow that it chases by refuting it only to find itself once again in skepticism's footsteps. … Skepticism is *refutable*, but it returns."[10] Philosophical thought takes us inexorably to skepticism and then resolves it. But skepticism always comes back. Using the language of Derrida, we could say that skepticism deconstructs philosophy, reason's project to have certainty. But as too many who propounded deconstruction in the United States forgot, a deconstruction is not an utter destruction. Reason doesn't go away, nor does skepticism cease to haunt it.

However, as Ewa Ziarek has astutely pointed out, thinkers like Levinas, Cavell, and Derrida neither advance a new skepticism nor

literally, "being there," is important. His later works show the relational being of things as well as persons.

10 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 168. Translation revised.

refute classical skepticism.[11] They are no longer concerned with showing either that the subject is the center of meaning or that she cannot be. They see something very important in the inescapability of skepticism, but what they see is not the completion of an epistemological search — not even that of discovering there is no end to the search. In fact the aporias to which skepticism takes us force us to cease thinking that epistemology is the foundation of all philosophy. Skepticism takes us beyond epistemology, for it is the warrant for turning thought to alterity, to what exceeds our conceptual grasp in the experiences of language, art, and human relationships. (It is this interest in alterity that explains the oft-noted resemblance between Derrida's thought and negative theology.) For Levinas, what is crucial about skepticism is that it contests the possibility of philosophical (read "epistemological") truth, and that contest points beyond philosophical truth to the possibility of some other form of truth. For Levinas that other form of truth is personal: ethics.

Ethical truth is not the truth of moral standards. It is the truth of the relationships with others that come prior to any conceptual understanding of the world, the relationships that make conceptual understanding possible, indeed the relationships that make moral standards possible. Ethical truth is the truth of transcendence, the transascendence of the other person. Levinas and others have explored the question of what that transcendence means. My question is how to think that transcendence theologically. As has already been suggested, my answer will be that transcendence is in living flesh, using the term *flesh* for a sensate thing in the world that is affected by other things in the world and by itself. I am flesh because things affect me and I respond, and I am flesh because I am aware of myself.

Self-awareness doesn't mean that I always — or ever — have full-blown self-consciousness. It doesn't mean that there is nothing about me that remains inaccessible to my conscious ego. But it does mean that self-consciousness — knowing-that as well as knowing — is an aspect of human flesh. As Marion tells us, fleshly existence in the here and now is a mode of thought: "I think myself in feeling myself …in an immediacy that abolishes the separation that is proper to representation."[12] This is

11 Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism* (Albany: SUNY, 1996), 7.

12 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 39.

thought, but not yet rational thought, for it is singular: this here, this now.

But I am ahead of myself. Eventually the question will be how a Levinasian philosophy thinks what is transcendent and what that might say about how philosophy can talk about divine transcendence. Begin with something more mundane, the phenomenon. In spite of efforts to avoid idealism, I think it is fair to say that every philosophical explanation of how we experience phenomena eventually comes down to one kind of idealism or another precisely because we cannot avoid skepticism. In other words, explanations of how we experience things comes down to the idea that what I really experience are my ideas and not the things themselves. Those on both sides of the great divide between Kant and Hume believe that we have access only to our ideas of things, not to things themselves. They disagree mightily about what that means, but they agree that we do not have access to things themselves. Some are willing to add context to my ideas — there must be not only an ego experiencing the phenomena, but also a context in which those phenomena occur — but that changes the point very little: I know only my ideas and not things themselves. I don't know my children or my wife, only my ideas of them. I don't know God, only my idea of him. In truth, I think that few thinkers actually believe that everything amounts to my ideas and my context. Nevertheless, it is hard to figure out a philosophical way around the problem of skepticism about the world and, therefore, a way around the problem of idealism.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, an alternative arose that gives us a way of thinking about our perceptions of objects and eventually a way of thinking about persons that accounts for our connection to the world itself and not just to our ideas. The first thinker to consider in that alternative is Edmund Husserl. Husserl argues that the categorial (thinking that involves syntax and not just reference[13]) goes beyond sense data but nevertheless cannot be reduced to a mental phenomenon. Tasting my ice cream cone, I say "This is vanilla." I recognize not only that I have tasted the flavor of vanilla, but that it belongs to the ice cream. I can name many characteristics of the ice cream, it's temperature and texture and color, for example. In addition to anything on the list, there is the belonging-together of those things on the list. I experience that belonging-together in experiencing the various predicates that I can apply to the ice cream cone rather than

13 Robert Sokolowski, "Husserl's Concept of Categorial Intuition," *Phenomenology and the Human Sciences* (1981): 127–49, cf. 128.

in addition to them.[14] Thus the belonging-together of the predicates is not an additional predicate. It transcends each of the properties of intuition as well as any collection of them. Remember, however, that intuition doesn't mean here what we mean in ordinary conversation.

To be clear: for philosophers, an intuition is something that gives a person an experience. Intuition is the immediate apprehension of something. An intuition doesn't necessarily cause someone to have a thought, but it does give them an experience. If I hit my finger with a hammer, I have an intuition, a sensible intuition, not because it makes any sense at all to hit my finger with a hammer, but because I am given an experience of sensation by the hammer.

Whatever developments the last hundred years plus have brought, Husserl's insight about the categorial character of intuition continues to be decisive. We continue to find ourselves re-writing one of his fundamental observations: to see an object is to see more than merely the raw sense data of that object; it is for the object to appear excessively; it is for it to appear as a thing that transcends our mere perceptions of it. Perception is always of something more. That transcendence is not given in a separate intuition, and that is the decisive point: *all intuition is, in itself, an intuition of "something more."*[15]

This something more is not something metaphysically beyond. The metaphysical beyond is reason's attempt to bring the excess under the rule of thought by creating a fictive realm of origin for our experience, a presumed world behind appearances. We invent the metaphysical to explain the transcendence in our experience. Things (and persons) transcend us; experience is always experience of the transcendent, so we experience the transcendent in any experience. But transcendence need not be understood metaphysically, as another realm of being, for example.

With Husserl, we recognize that transcendence is part of the constitution of any appearance. The excess is *already* in the appearance rather than something we come to see in addition to the thing. To use Marion's phrase, the excess appears as "being given,"[16] the givenness of things already there. But is the being-together of the intuited properties

14 The example is Sokolowski's: Sokolowski, "Husserl's Concept" cf. 129. I highly recommend Sokolowski's piece for any who wish to delve into this further.

15 Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *La croisée du visible* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 100.

16 Of course, the word *appears* must be understood here "under erasure," to use Derrida's term: this appearing is also a non-appearing.

of the thing sufficient to account for that givenness? That question takes us to the next step in this abbreviated history.

In his *Being and Time* Heidegger accepts Husserl's analysis, but goes beyond it. He argues that the excess of appearance is found not only in the experience of the thing before me, but in the horizon of the meaningful material totality within which the thing appears and to which it implicitly refers. The excessive character of my ice cream cone is to be found not only in the being-together of its properties, but in its situation within the physical horizon — for example, the shop in which I buy the cone — as well as the horizon of historical and cultural practices that give my purchase of the cone and my consumption of it the meanings that it has. The excess of experience is in the world and not just in the thing. It has a social and historical component as much as physical and sensate ones.

An example: suppose I am looking at something, perhaps the lamp on my desk. There are three things involved: me, the thing in question, and the context. Without any one of those, there is no phenomenon of the lamp. When no one is in the room, there is something here, but it isn't a phenomenon; for the lamp isn't appearing to anyone. If there's nothing on my desk that could shed light, I may imagine that I see a lamp, but I mistake one phenomenon (too many unidentified mushrooms for dinner) for another (a lamp on my desk). And if there's no context, no lamp can appear either.

The necessity and scope of context is a little more difficult to show, but not terribly difficult: in order for a lamp really to appear before me, I have to be part of a culture that has lamps. If I'm not, then something appears before me on the desk, but it isn't a lamp. Perhaps it is merely a "something-I-know-not-what," but I cannot experience it as a lamp. Context includes the history and practices of our culture as well as the obvious things we think of as context, like the room in which both the lamp and I exist, etc. Context includes all of the background information and the physical setting that make it possible for me to have the experience of the lamp.

It seems, then, that we can say that there is a phenomenon when three things come together: a perceiver, a thing to be perceived, and a context or horizon that makes possible and gives meaning to the perception of the thing. The problem is that the more I think about those three, the less the thing itself becomes important and the more the perceiver and the horizon (especially the cultural, linguistic, and historical context) become important. In other words, the more I think about what is going

on when I experience a phenomenon, the more it seems to be a matter of only my ideas and horizon. Once again I seem forced in the direction of skepticism regarding anything but my ideas.

Whatever one makes of Levinas's thinking overall, he makes an important contribution to this philosophy when he argues that we are taking up the question in the wrong way: if we start from the ego and its constructions of the world, then there is no lasting escape from skepticism. From that beginning, with its goal of certainty, there is no accounting for relation to what is outside of oneself. The ego cannot lift itself by the bootstraps to get out of itself. The mistake, Levinas argues, is in thinking that signification begins with the ego. Instead, it is ultimately found in transcendence itself. Signification begins from outside of me, from what transcends me. Only by starting from the relation of another, can we give an account of a non-solipsistic world, of an existence in which genuine relation to another is possible rather than relation merely to my understandings of others.[17] In answer to the question "How do I get outside myself, beyond my representations of the world and other persons in the word?" Levinas replies, I don't. *I* cannot. But relation to another is possible because that relation does not begin with me, but with the other person. In fact, he argues, relation with another makes my representations of the world possible: the Good (relation to another person) is prior to being, or as he also puts it, ethics is prior to ontology.[18] According to *Totality and Infinity*, the relationship with another person, transcendence, is first marked out by the passivity of human flesh, by passion in its root sense as well as its ordinary sense: our passive being and the phenomenological priority of that passivity in our experience demonstrate that there is transcendence.

For Levinas and his heirs, particularly for Jean-Luc Marion, this investigation of transcendence remains at the heart of philosophy.[19] Following Descartes, Levinas names that which transcends *God*.[20] However the term is misleading. Doesn't the capital "a" in *l'Autrui* ("the Others") suggest that we are referring to what theology has called "the

17 See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, in toto* for the argument.

18 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201.

19 That is how, for example, to understand not only works like Marion's *Being Given* and *In Excess* (Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud [New York: Fordham University Press, 2002]), but also his and Derrida's interest in the possibility of the gift. They ask the question, "Can there be an event that goes beyond the economy of exchange?" A crucial question for any believer in Christ's redemptive sacrifice.

20 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 48–50.

wholly Other," to the divine being, God? I think not. For one thing, Levinas is not entirely consistent about capitalizing that "a." More significantly, important readers of Levinas's philosophical work, understand the other person and God as indistinguishable. The French term *l'autri* means "the other persons," and in the important strain of Levinasian thought typified by thinkers such as Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, the other person is the only god there is. Thus, whatever the merits of Levinas's criticism of Heidegger,[21] at best it leaves us confused about theological transcendence. At worst it makes it indistinguishable from human transcendence — assuming for now that is bad.

Marion responds to that muddle by going back to Brentano's insight that the senses of transcendence or excess are manifold.[22] In the post-Husserlian tradition of Heidegger, Henry, and Levinas, Marion argues that in knowing sense objects we know more than we take account of in any epistemology. Along with what we usually recognize as knowledge, knowledge of primary and secondary qualities for instance, we also know — are acquainted with, in relation with — something more than sense, but also more than the belonging-together of Husserl's categorial intuition, and more than the temporal-ecstatic horizon of Heidegger. In some phenomena, Marion argues, the excess of the more-than is itself revealed. Those are phenomena in which the intuition of the object exceeds the phenomenon, "saturated phenomena" as opposed to "impoverished phenomena."[23]

Comparison to Kant may help. In Kant, a phenomenon must be understood within a horizon and according to an I. Without both the ego and the horizon of understanding provided by the categories of understanding (such as the fact that what I see is necessarily either one or multiple), there is no phenomenon. As a result, Kant would say, it is impossible for there to be an unconditioned phenomenon, a pure experience of transcendence; every experience is conditioned by the categories of understanding. Kant argues that to the degree that we deal with conditioned phenomena we do not deal with what is transcendent, and it is not possible to deal with unconditioned phenomena. So, it is not possible to deal with anything transcendent itself. The

21 I think his criticism is ultimately mistaken, though it shows us a way to read Heidegger more fruitfully by giving us a phenomenology of the Other.

22 See Franz Brentano, *On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle*, trans. Rolf George (Berkeley: University of California, 1975).

23 Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, "The Event, the Phenomenon, and the Revealed," in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion* trans. Beata Starwaska, ed. James E. Faulconer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 87–105, cf. 104.

thing-in-itself remains out of our grasp. Marion's project is to show that an unconditioned phenomenon is possible: we do experience that which is transcendent. His strategy is to argue for "saturated phenomena" rather than the "impoverished phenomena" of Kant, which Marion says are impoverished because they are constituted as phenomena by their horizon and subject, with little or nothing given by intuition. Marion's objection to Kant's first Critique, the book in which he makes his argument against unconditioned phenomena, is that it slights intuition; he tries to show what happens when we give sufficient attention to intuition.

Given the strength of Kant's argument, it is tempting simply to reject Marion's position out of hand. However, Marion points out that his suggestion that unconditioned phenomena are possible is not as wild as it may seem at first glance. After all, we find something like the same idea in Kant's aesthetic, where the aesthetic idea is an intuition for which no adequate concept can be formed.[24] In Kant's aesthetic, the concept is impoverished, not the intuition, for the intuition gives too much to think. Kant says that this excessiveness of intuition is "inexposable"; Marion uses, instead, the word "invisible." The invisible phenomenon is "invisible, not by lack of light, but by excess of light."[25] We don't have to think what exceeds intuition in terms of enormity. All that is necessary is that it be impossible to apply a successive synthesis to the phenomenon so that one can see the sum of its parts. The invisible is excessive of understanding because no *successive* synthesis is possible, not no synthesis at all.

In spite of the impossibility of performing a successive synthesis and, thereby, coming to a knowledge of the whole, it is possible to have an instantaneous synthesis of the saturated phenomenon. Amazement and bedazzlement are examples of such instantaneous syntheses. When I find something amazing, I don't do so after careful consideration. Neither can the experience be analyzed into a synthesis of component experiences. What is amazing becomes amazing all at once in an irreducible experience: "Wow! I've never seen that before" I may say even though I'm looking at something I've seen a hundred times. I'm amazed. And what is amazing about amazement is that there is no way to account

24 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*.

25 Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* Dominique Janicaud, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, and Paul Ricoeur trans. by Bernard G. Prusak and Jeffrey L. Klosky (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 176–215, cf. 197.

for it only in terms of my ideas and the context. In fact, something is amazing precisely because it doesn't fit my ideas of it or the context. I didn't expect it and, given what my knowledge and context was before the moment that I am amazed, I couldn't have. I may now look back and say, "I should have seen it all along," but I am only amazed because, under the same circumstances and with the same ideas, I wouldn't have seen it.

If amazement is possible, then it is possible for there to be phenomena that are not completely determined by my context and my ideas. Such phenomena, Marion says, are saturated rather than impoverished. In other words, most phenomena are reducible to our ideas and contexts and, so, impoverished. But phenomena like amazement and bedazzlement and some aesthetic experience are phenomena in which we are overcome by intuition in excess of our ideas. They are saturated. Thus, what I see in the vision of the saturated phenomenon is not darkness, but something so bright that it blurs my vision, something I c*annot* see clearly. Marion says: "Because the saturated phenomenon, due to the excess of intuition in it, cannot be borne by any gaze that would measure up to it ('objectively'), it is perceived ('subjectively') by the gaze only in the negative mode of an impossible perception, the mode of bedazzlement."[26] The language of subjectivity and objectivity is inadequate to the experience of the saturated phenomenon.

An aside is important here: ultimately Marion's argument leads to the conclusion that in principle *all* phenomena are saturated. They become objects, though, to the degree that they fall within the horizon of being and are subject to categorial intuitions. They withdraw behind ordinary — in other words, ordered — or objective phenomena and allow us to get about our practical concerns, but those ordinary and objective phenomena have their origin in the actuality of saturated phenomena. Amazement and bedazzlement are not only to be found in the exceptional case. With Heidegger, Marion believes that such experiences are the fundamental modes of our experience of the world and, so, determinative of phenomena.

Amazement and bedazzlement cannot be the constant way in which we encounter the world or they would not be either amazement or bedazzlement. If they were constant, we would never be able to get on. I live most of my life as "one" lives life, shopping as one shops, for example.

26 Marion, "Saturated Phenomenon," 201. The words *objectively* and *subjectively* are between quotation marks because bedazzlement is exactly not an object of a subject, in other words something constituted by the subject.

I do not look for some unique, authentic way for me to shop, perhaps refusing to use the check out counter as one does and, instead, taking my eggs with me out the back door of the store. Inauthenticity is not a moral category and it is certainly not something that I should always avoid. Heidegger's term for inauthenticity, *Uneigentlichkeit*, should be understood quite literally: not-one's-ownness. Most of the time I proceed in a way that is not mine, a way that I have been given by my history, culture, and context, and the covering-over of bedazzling appearances that happens in inauthenticity is necessary to my existence as a person among other persons going about mundane tasks.[27] Nevertheless, the covering-over that constitutes ordinary life and experience is possible only on the basis of an existentially prior encounter with things in which amazement and bedazzlement are essential.

Marion's argument is not anti-Kantian. Rather his rhetorical question is "Must every phenomenon…respect the unity of experience?"[28] and the answer is no. Thus, he does not argue against the claim that something like Kantian categories are fundamental to our experience of phenomena, but for the claim that the saturated phenomenon goes beyond them. In the experience of the saturated phenomenon there are the categories of experience and there is a horizon. Indeed, the saturation of the phenomenon can only be understood because there are categories and the horizon. But the saturated phenomenon is what it is by the fact that it exceeds them.

For Marion, saturated phenomena fall into four categories:

- The event, namely the historical event[29]
- The idol, of which the most frequent example is the painting[30]
- Flesh, in other words affectivity[31]

27 See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §27.

28 Jean-Luc Marion, "Sketch of the Saturated Phenomenon," in *Jean-Luc Marion: The Essential Writings*, ed. Kevin Hart (New York: Fordham University Press, 201), 108–34; cf. 114. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy.

29 Marion sees the work of Paul Ricoeur as explicating this kind of saturated phenomenon in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984). See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 366, n. 84.

30 See Marion, *In Excess*, especially chapters 3 and 5. See also Marion's *Being Given*, 366, n. 85. Derrida, he says, has explicated this kind of saturated phenomenon.

31 Here the connection between Marion and Michel Henry is explicit (Marion, Being Given, 366, n. 85).

- The icon, that which regards me rather than is regarded; the look of the other person.[32]

Note that, of these four categories of saturated phenomena, two are of flesh, my flesh (affectivity) and that of the other person whom I encounter (the icon). Note also that things (including events) appear and persons appear, and one cannot fully attend to appearance of either without paying attention to both their material or fleshly character and the fact that they appear to *me*. I am in relation with them because I am affected by them. Any constitution by the ego follows from that being-affected.

To these four, with which few have argued, Marion adds a more problematic fifth: revelation, which "concentrates in itself the first four senses of the saturated phenomenon."[33] Almost certainly with Dominique Janicaud's criticism of him in mind,[34] Marion insists that this fifth category is a philosophical possibility rather than a claim that requires Christian faith.[35] Perhaps this fifth category could be filled only by the historical and living Jesus, but Marion is not arguing that the category has a member.

Brock Mason has argued cogently that Marion's fifth kind of saturated phenomenon falls back into his fourth: "Nothing separates [the icon and the revelation] as a phenomenon except, perhaps, who in particular appears as the icon (whether it is God or some human other)."[36] What was held out only as a possibility is not even a distinctly different possibility. Whatever the difference between the divine and the human, either each transcends the person in the same modality or we have yet to have an account of divine transcendence. Marion has strong dogmatic reasons for distinguishing between, on the one hand, the phenomenon of the

32 Marion, *Being Given*, 228–34. See also Marion, "Saturated Phenomenon" 215. Notice that Marion uses the word *event* to describe the first kind of saturated phenomenon, though he also understands each of these categories to be categories of events, happenings rather than atemporal things. As the name of the first category, the word *event* has its more ordinary signification, "that about which we can give a narrative."

33 Marion, *Being Given,* 237. For the full discussion of the five kinds of saturated phenomena see 234–241.

34 See Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology," in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate*. See also, Dominique Janicaud, *Phénoménologie éclatée* (Paris: Eclat, 1998). Janicaud's criticism is that Marion has turned from philosophy to theology.

35 Marion, *Being Given*, 234–35.

36 Brock Mason, unpublished Honors thesis, Brigham Young University, April 2013, 17. A shorter version of the thesis has been published at http://aporia.byu.edu/pdfs/mason-saturated_phenomena.pdf.

icon, of the other person, and, on the other hand, that of the revelation, the experience of Christ. But he hasn't given convincing philosophical reasons for doing so.

Indeed, if one takes a point of view on these matters that is consistent with that of the thinkers to whom I have been pointing, we understand that revelation is not the revelation of something beyond human knowledge, but the basic form of human knowledge. Revelation is neither (as the tradition has assumed) an exception to our experience of phenomena nor (as in Marion) an additional mode of revealing. Instead, it is the most radical or fundamental case of *any* intuition. Revelation is the first way of experiencing the world — revelation and amazement and bedazzlement — even though in or workaday lives we have strategies for no longer being amazed and bedazzled. Most language and systematic thought is a strategy for allowing us not to be amazed by things so that we can get on about our business, but that fact seduces us into forgetting that revelation is the basic category of experience.

There are lots of things we can say about revelation (and, so, also about other experiences that revelation helps us understand). For one, no matter what set of historical or cultural paradigms we try to use to understand it, we will not be completely successful. That isn't because there is something wrong with revelation. It isn't because it is irrational or subjective, nor is it because it refers to something in another metaphysical sphere. Rather, it is because what is revealed always exceeds or overflows any cultural or historical paradigm. We can talk about an event of revelation in one way. We can talk about it in another. But any revelation, including that of supposedly ordinary things, is sufficiently rich that, *in principle*, there is not just one way of talking about it. No thought or system of thought will make it fully comprehensible. If we could make a revelation fully comprehensible, then we would have a context and a set of ideas that included all possibilities. That is in principle impossible. A context that included all possibilities wouldn't be a context.

We can also say that revelation demonstrates our finitude. If the world were really made of only our ideas and culture, for all practical purposes we would be infinite beings. We wouldn't be able to do just anything that popped into our imaginations, but we would be the ones who create the world we live in. The only limits would be our limits, not the limits of things on us. That is one definition of an infinite being. But if things amaze us, then we are not pure actuality. We are not the creators of the universe. To be enspirited flesh means passivity: to be is to be affected; I am *me* more fundamentally than I am *I*. To use Levinas's

language, our existence is in the accusative.[37] We are passive as well as active; our being is inextricably a matter of possibility. There are things that we do not constitute and that, in fact, constitute us and impinge on us.

Recognizing the failure of Marion's argument for a special category of divine revelation, these insights nevertheless put philosophical meat on the bones of the LDS teaching that God is embodied. For Greeks and Jews alike, the skandalon (σκάνδαλον) of Christianity was Jesus' incarnation: his existence before and after his resurrection as incarnate God. The refusal of most first-century Jews and Greeks to consider the possibility of the resurrection eventually turned to violence and dualism. The Christian insistence on that resurrection testifies of the faith of early Christians. We see that faith in the early church councils' insistence on keeping faith with the earliest Christians by maintaining the teaching of Christ's Incarnation.[38] Mormonism also keeps that faith: the revelation of God, of divine transcendence, happens in the world in a being. The insistence on divine embodiment is an insistence that transcendence is to be found only in immanence, not as merely an entry into immanence of something otherwise outside, but as essential to immanence.

If we reject idolatry, namely the idea that God appears to us in a nonpersonal material thing, then the alternative is for divine transcendence to reveal itself in a person of flesh. As a result, contrary to the way the problem of transcendence is usually understood, the question for philosophy and theology is not *what* exceeds the last horizon of perception and how we know it. The theological question is how God appears in the flesh.

One thing to note is that if Christianity insists on God's embodiment — that he, too, is in the accusative — then it also insists on *temporal* life, even for God. Temporality and being affected are logically inseparable. What that means is not easy to say. It involves a variety of theological quandaries.[39] But the temporality and passivity of God suggest a profoundly different understanding of how we ought to think about the divine: not only must we add an additional proposition to our theological understanding: God is all-knowing, all-loving, all-powerful — and embodied. Indeed, we must add that, but it isn't the most important

37 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 11, 43, etc. See also Henry, *Incarnation*, 173.

38 Henry, *Incarnation*, 14–15.

39 For discussion of some of these quandaries, see James E. Faulconer "Divine Embodiment and Transcendence: Propaedeutic Thoughts and Questions." *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 1, no. 1 (2005): 1–14.

implication for theological reflection. More important is that if we are to be true to the revelation of God as embodied we must take up theology in a different way. Our understanding of what it means to do theology will be different.

For millennia philosophy and theology have proceeded based on what I call "the professors' view of the world," the hidden assumption that mental activities are superior to other activities, so whatever the highest things are, they are the kinds of things best understood by the mind. That assumption is crudely and usually secretly built on the ancient assumption that contemplative, disembodied being — pure actuality — is superior to incarnate being. But running alongside the professors' story has been the other, usually overlooked, way of seeing the world, that of scripture. There Jesus tells us "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). He, not a set of rules that we can learn and analyze, is the way to God. He, rather than a collection of logically related propositions that we can either hold or deny, is the truth of the Father. His is the life to be lived. Jesus adds, "no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."[40] Clearly he is speaking of how we receive salvation: it comes only through him. But what he says applies also to how we understand the Father: we do so only through Jesus Messiah, a being of flesh. We know the Father and the Son as we know other persons, *in* and through relationships of ethical import.

Of course we can reflect on flesh and speak of it. I am doing that here. It can be useful to do so. Philosophy and theology can play an important part in our religious lives. But they are, strictly speaking, not necessary, and by itself reflecting on flesh cannot give us an understanding of it. Contrary to what most theologies claim, that appears to be true even for God since his existence is also enfleshed, in the accusative and not merely in the nominative. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews is relevant here: "Although he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things that he endured."[41] Being the Son of God means being passable, experiencing things other than himself, being affected by them. Alma's great sermon on the gospel includes a meaningful and beautiful expansion of the teaching in Hebrews:

> And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that

40 John 14:6

41 Heb. 5:8; my translation.

> his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities. (Alma 7:12)

According to Alma, even God, in order to fully be God and to help his people, must know as flesh knows rather than only as hypothetical pure minds might. Using Aristotle's terms, he must be possibility and not only actuality. Knowing according to the flesh means suffering, having experience that is in some degree passive. God cannot hear and answer prayer if he cannot be affected, but if he can be affected, then he cannot avoid suffering. Being affected by others and the possibility of suffering is not a consequence of our fallen state. It is concomitant with being flesh, and so also with the flesh of God.

Contrary to most theological traditions, for Latter-day Saints, because he is enfleshed, God cannot be impassable. Joseph Smith is reported to have said "The first principle of truth and of the Gospel is to know for a certainty the character of God, and that we may converse with Him the same as one man with another, and that He once was a man like one of us."[42] That has been the message of Christianity from the beginning, and not just the Restoration. Whatever has been made of metaphysical speculation about that message, the Word is revealed in flesh more than in propositions or reflection. To be revealed in flesh is not to be revealed in mere atoms and particles, but in the particular events of pleasure and suffering, hunger and thirst, desire and fatigue, force and delight that are integral to the lives of persons.[43]

But, more importantly, that God is embodied means that the Word is revealed in the accusative and, therefore, in multiplicity rather than metaphysical simplicity, in relationship and the necessity of response. Jesus' healings were not merely a sign of his messiahship. They showed his passability, that the others could affect him. As expressions of his existence in the flesh they were constitutive of the life in which he made that messiahship known. It follows that being like God includes our passability and our response to others. As Paul tells us, if we wish to be co-heirs with Jesus Christ, glorified as he is, then we too must suffer — endure — as he suffers and endures.[44] But we cannot suffer as he suffered

42 Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 8. (http://www.ldslearning.org/lds-king-follett-discourse-a-newly-amalgamated-text-byu.pdf).

43 Henry, *Incarnation*, 25.

44 Rom. 8:17.

without responding to what affects one as he would. Compassion is a way of being affected and enduring, rather than of being removed from passivity. Knowing that takes away the stigma of our own suffering. We do not suffer because we are defective, but because we are like God.

Reflection is an important fleshly activity, but hardly the only one. Nor is there any reason to believe that it is superior to all other fleshly activities when it comes to understanding rather than merely different from them. Whatever reflection can teach us, ultimately we understand flesh by being flesh as much as or more than by reflecting on it. That says at least two things. First, if life in the flesh is the basis of Christian understanding, then a reflection that does not begin with that life, that has recourse to the abstract either too quickly or as if the abstract were the fulfillment of understanding, is not sufficiently Christian, whatever its claim or its content. The ground of theological reflection must be the incarnate Christ, who was born, lived a human life, was executed, and was resurrected to sit at the right hand of the Father.

Second, from that ground must grow a Christian life that embodies the truth that Jesus is: the way, the truth, and the life. That coming together of his way of life, the truth of his life, and the living of it is the basis of any Christian understanding. Theological reflection cannot usurp Christian life as the locus for Christian self-understanding, as it tends to do. Whatever its uses, ultimately theology is beside the point. We are not better Christians because we understand Christianity. We are only real Christians if we live Christianity. Its truth can only be entered by entering into the flesh and life of Jesus Christ, his way of experiencing the world. Only in Christian life can Christianity be fully understood; only Christian life can tell the Christian story fully. In that case what remains to theology is less the rational sketching out of how beliefs hang together (though that can have an important place in Christian service) than it is the possibility of a hermeneutic of religious texts and practices (for example, liturgy) that serve to help the believer understand how to *be* a Christian and serve as witness to the unbeliever.

According to the *Lectures on Faith*, we know of God through tradition or we know of him through revelation.[45] If the analyses of contemporary thinkers are not incorrect (though if nothing else the history of philosophy teaches us not to forget that they well may be), to know of him by revelation is to know him in a way akin to the way that we know other persons. God's incarnate self-revelation is idiosyncratic because it cannot be seen with the natural eyes. But it is nevertheless

45 *Lectures on Faith* 2.53.

the experience of another, incarnate person. As can be the being of any other person, God's being can be attested by those who have seen him, and that attestation can serve as a vehicle for his further self-revelation.

However, even without direct experience of God as a being, we know him, as opposed to only knowing *of* him, by being in relationship with him. We know him by living the way, truth, and life that he is. That too is revelation. We know him in prayer and worship, more revelation. Like Abraham, we find ourselves called by God and we must respond "Here I am" (Gen. 22:1), announcing our readiness to be commanded by him. We covenant to be ready. We make an oath to continue in that relationship in imitation of the oath God has already sworn to us as his children. And we imitate him by repeating that oath in our relationships with other persons. But whether spoken to God or another human being, "Here I am" is empty if it is not a performative statement, if I do not in fact put myself at the disposal of the other person in saying it. The oath and covenant of relationship with God comes only in my being in his presence at his disposal, which means equally being with and at the disposal of other persons.

Christ's incarnation was not only something believed by the early Church. As I noted earlier, in spite of the complicated history of Christian theology, the incarnation has been insisted on by Christian scripture and Christians for millennia, offering a 2,000 year-old, on-going alternative to much of the theological tradition that has made God metaphysically other than Creation. (That is one reason we can continue to go to other Christian thinkers as partners in thinking about what it means to be Christian.) What, then, does the incarnate character of God's existence imply theologically? Perhaps more important than anything else, it tells us that he is a God of possibility. He is a being whom we can know as a person and to whom we can meaningfully pray. And as scriptures have taught for thousands of years, he suffers. Things affect him. Like us, God can have relationships with other persons and be in covenant with them only if he can be affected by them, only if suffering is possible.

That God is a being of flesh implies as well that he can be known. In some sense he appears in the world as other beings appear, as an enfleshed person whom we can see and to whom we can be related. But even without that kind of knowledge he can be known by testimony and by performance. Those who know him directly testify of him. We can hear and read their testimonies. We can know him through prayer because we speak to him as we speak to another person, and he answers. Most importantly, anyone can know him by living the life he lives, which

includes not only the performance of religious rites, but the performance of our obligations to other persons. Our life with God in the flesh, in the accusative rather than the nominative, requires that of us.

Of course God is transcendent. His goodness and mercy are transcendent, for example. But his being is as well. His embodied being, like all embodied being, transcends ours. Indeed, he transcends us *because* he is embodied. Were he not, his transcendence would not make the relational demand on us that it makes. He would not call to us and require our response, "Here I am."

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