

## THE EROTIC PHENOMENON

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***The Erotic Phenomenon.*** By Jean-Luc Marion. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2007. Pp. 230. \$35.00 (cloth).

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Jean-Luc Marion's latest work is a timely celebration of the *agapaic* structure of sexuality, made possible by a non-reductive and affirmative account of both femininity and erotic intersubjectivity. Much like

a Kierkegaardian reading of Hegel, Marion takes up the basic Levinasian framework employed in the (in)famous section 'The Phenomenology of Eros' from *Totality and Infinity*, only to utilise it as a means of offering a sustained critique of Levinas' understanding of sexual embodiment and the feminine. *The Erotic Phenomenon* forms a striking continuum with Marion's previous work by elaborating upon some of his most cherished themes: the third reduction, the saturated phenomenon, love without being, the gift, the overcoming of metaphysics etc. Indeed, Marion suggests in the preface that his entire *oeuvre* has been leading up to the question of the erotic phenomenon (p.10). Prospective readers will be happy to learn that the book is considerably easier to read than some of its more difficult predecessors (e.g. *God Without Being*). It is a fine example of how the phenomenological approach can articulate meaningful and perceptive descriptions of phenomena, that in the hands of reductive materialists, are reduced to utilitarian and chemical calculations. In this respect Marion finds himself challenging not only the metaphysics of rationalism but also the metaphysics of scientism.

Marion claims that the traditional metaphysical depiction of the human being as the *ego cogito*, who is primarily concerned with its own existence, forgets what is most unique to humanity: the capacity to (and question of) love. Thus 'to be or not to be' is most certainly not the question (p.38). The human being risks vanity and nihilism by refusing the question of love; only when she inaugurates the erotic reduction by asking 'Does anybody out there love me?' does she become authentically human. Yet even this question leads to a type of 'ontological' vanity (as *being* loved is valued more than love) and in turn ultimately to the impossibility of self-love, and so the erotic reduction must be radicalized with the question, 'Can I love first, even without *being* loved in return?' From here a

highly perceptive and nuanced description is developed of the way in which the erotic subject loves the erotic other via the mutual crossing of their *flesh*.

Unfortunately for those unfamiliar with Husserlian phenomenology, before the book delves fully into what is an otherwise accessible treatment of *eros* it dedicates a short but crucial section (pp. 95-105) to explicating the erotic phenomenon in terms of Husserlian intuition and signification. For example, unlike simple physical bodies which are 'poor phenomena', the flesh is a 'saturated phenomenon' that gives the erotic subject an intuition exceeding any signification she could fix on it, and is thus infinitely more meaningful than a mere cadaver or some piece of carrion. Likewise, the decision to 'love first' amounts to receiving a similarly superabundant intuition; yet in order for a phenomenon to appear, some kind of signification must attach itself to this intuition. The appropriate signification is given by the oath of the beloved—an oath whereby she promises herself to the lover forever. The oath of fidelity is of course reciprocal. Thus lover and beloved fix their common signification onto their respective erotic intuitions and hence mutually accomplish the properly erotic phenomenon, or what Marion also calls in this instance a 'crossed phenomenon' (p. 103).

The task of the general reader could have been made easier if this short section did not assume a little background knowledge of Marion's earlier works (specifically *God Without Being* and *Being Given*). Yet this is as technical as the book gets and really only requires a careful re-reading for the basic idea to take hold. If the reader has the patience to negotiate this section then she will find a sharp analysis of erotic love which encompasses issues such as infidelity, lying, pornography, masturbation, orgasm and procreation of the child. Marion's main thesis is that *eros* and *agape* are inseparable and that erotic love is therefore possible outside of physical contact. In fact the erotic reduction is only fully accomplished when the lover resolves to love the erotic other with an eschatological love, i.e. resolving to love as if every instant is the last chance to ever love again. In many regards this work can be seen as a sustained attempt to marry a sharp criticism of Levinas' Phenomenology of Eros with Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae*, wherein the *agapaic* structure of *eros* is stressed. One of Marion's great gifts is to preside over this marriage without coming across as overly moralistic. He 'corrects' the blatant Levinasian denigration of the feminine and instead invests her with a living and breathing sexuality insubordinate to the masculine. He also accords physical love a status much more exalted than that which Levinas terms the 'profane'.

However, readers might well wonder whether Marion's move from physical love-making to making love through speech is phenomenologically justified. He fails to sufficiently explicate what it means for lovers to give each other their flesh outside of physical contact (pp. 181-3) other than alluding to the original meaning of *faire l'amour*. Perhaps more explanation and less wordplay is needed for what is a crucial transition point in the work, one that if properly accomplished allows for a greater understanding of eschatological love.

It is a shame also that the book contains no clarifying footnotes or references, other than the translator's. It is left completely up to the reader to draw an understanding of where this work lies in relation to Levinas and the rest of the phenomenological tradition (including Luce Irigaray and even Marion himself). Yet overall the book works on its own merits. The translation by Stephen E. Lewis is entirely unproblematic, and Marion has managed to further enhance his position as one of the few true innovators of phenomenology.

### **References**

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, 1969)

Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London, 1991),

Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given, Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, 2002)