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Belonging and Longing: The Question of the Subject in Renaud Barbaras and Jean-Luc Marion

ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Renaud Barbaras and Jean-Luc Marion departs from the transcendental role of the subject. No longer is the subject regarded as its own foundation, nor does it own or constitute its objects. Instead, it originates from some other principle and source. In order to comprehend why the subject loses its transcendental role, we first examine how the two phenomenologists perform the phenomenological reduction and to which more primordial instance than the subject itself it leads them. Consequently, we outline the tension inherent in the new understanding of the subject as one who receives itself from the givenness (Marion) or as life in the world and the desire of the world (Barbaras). The central theme of our study on the decentralized subject revolves around the concepts of belonging and longing. It can be argued that the essence and belonging of the subject lie in its desire and longing. Barbaras and Marion both consider the dimension of desire and love to be crucial for the subject. This essay seeks to highlight the commonalities and the reasons for the differences in their understanding of desire.

Keywords: Renaud Barbaras, Jean-Luc Marion, subject, love, desire.

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenology seeks to return to the things themselves through *epoché*, but we also observe a zigzag motion in the way it proceeds: "We search, as it were, in zigzag fashion, a metaphor all the more apt since the close interdependence of our various epistemological concepts leads us back again and again to our original analyses, where the new confirms the old, and the old the new" (Husserl, *Logical* 175). Due to "the essential correlation between appearing and that which appears" (Husserl, *Idea* 69), i.e. the "universal a priori of correlation" between a given thing and its subjective modes of givenness, this zigzag specifically moves between the terms of this correlation.[1] Thus, through *epoché*, Husserl leads to a new understanding of the subject reduced to the realm of immanent lived experiences of consciousness, which is nevertheless transcendental, intentional, and intrinsically related to the objects constituted by it. This hermeneutic zigzag can also take the form given to it by Heidegger in *Being and Time*—the clarification of the sense of being requires the clarification of the sense of being of the "subject," now understood as being-in-the-world and ek-sistence.

One could say, then, that at the heart of phenomenology lies the question of the role of the subject and its relation to the world or the other. To help us describe the subject in phenomenology a pair of concepts—belonging and longing—can be taken as a certain heuristic and hermeneutic guiding thread. For the question of the subject's dwelling, of its own "essence" (belonging), paradoxically seems to lead to its transcending nature (longing). Furthermore, there is a tension between these two aspects that is fundamental to the question of the subject. The preservation or resolution of this tension has significant consequences for a given philosophy.

The phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion and Renaud Barbaras exhibits a similar tension. The aim of this article is to highlight both the similarities and differences in their approaches to the subject's role. The common thesis of both philosophers is the paradoxical notion that the essence of the subject, its belonging, is its longing and desire. The difference lies in the interpretation of the nature and "object" of this desire. This difference, however, arises from the distinct phenomenological principles and the

[1] The importance of this correlation is indicated, for example, by the following comment by Husserl: "The first breakthrough of this universal a priori of correlation between experienced object and manners of givenness (which occurred during work on my *Logical Investigations* around 1898) affected me so deeply that my whole subsequent life-work has been dominated by the task of systematically elaborating on this a priori of correlation" (*Crisis* 166).

results of the reduction. Marion reduces the subject to givenness, which serves as the manifestation principle of the phenomenon. In contrast, Barbaras reduces the subject to the horizon of life and the world, leading to metaphysical and cosmological considerations.[2]

THE ABSOLUTE AND THE RELATIVE

Phenomenological reduction leads to an irreducible principle that is considered absolute. Unlike Husserl, Marion and Barbaras claim that the transcendental subject itself is not this absolute principle and must undergo reduction. Marion says: "The reduction thus always first reduces the one who operates it—and it is by this recoiling on itself that the phenomenological validity of each attempt at reduction is measured" (*Excess* 47). However, Marion argues that although phenomenology has progressed beyond Husserl's transcendental "I," another instance often assumes the equivalent role of the transcendental subject—"*Dasein*, the face of the other, flesh" (46). To comprehend the reason for the changes in the understanding of the subject, it is necessary to inquire about the starting point and irreducible principles of Barbaras's and Marion's phenomenological reflection.

The starting point of Barbaras's phenomenology is the aforementioned "correlative a priori" and the question of perception. He argues that the only way to truly understand perception is to avoid reducing it to one pole of correlation, resulting in naïve realism or idealism (even a transcendental one). What makes this understanding of perception possible in Barbaras's approach, which seeks to overcome the primacy of the transcendental subject, is the horizon of the world in which the phenomenon appears (Barbaras, *Dynamique* 243). Hence the ultimate threefold structure of manifestation, according to Barbaras following Patočka, is the world, the one to whom the world appears, and the "how of manifestation," i.e. the interrelation of the two (Barbaras, *Introduction* 86).

Maintaining this position is not easy, since the subject cannot simply be juxtaposed with the world, nor *vice versa*. For a thing to appear to the subject, to be given to him "in person" (*leibhaft* is Husserl's actual term) (Husserl, *Ideas* 181), the subject must be flesh in the world, or rather must be as living flesh (not only as physical body) part of that world (and, as Merleau-Ponty notes, the world must thus also be related to the flesh).

[2] On the question of subject in Barbaras and Marion, see Pommier—in our paper we focus more on the role of desire. On the question of subject after its metaphysical and transcendental understanding, see Cadava, Connor, and Nancy.

On the other hand, Barbaras reproaches Merleau-Ponty, arguing that the manifestation of phenomena would not occur if the subject belonging to the world were not somehow, in the manner of being, different from it. Barbaras summarizes the problem as follows: "The subject is a being that is unique because it is enveloped by what it conditions, involved, so to speak, in a spectacle that it stages" (*Introduction* 92, translation mine). At this point, the key technical terms for Barbaras are "belonging" and "cobelonging" (*Desire* 63). The subject belongs to the world and the world belongs to the subject:

> The body envelops the world, that is to say makes it appear, only to the degree to which it is enveloped by it, so that the manifestation of the world *for* the body is at the same time manifestation of the world *by itself* within the body, so that the body's constituting power coincides with the phenomenalizing potency of the world. This intertwining reveals therefore an ontological continuity between the body and the world, a cobelonging deeper than their opposition; and it is this cobelonging that the concept of Flesh receives. Flesh designates nothing more than the element itself of appearance insofar as it has, as constitutive moments, the appearing world and a subject that is on the side of what it makes appear, and is consequently incarnated. (Barbaras, *Desire* 159–60)

How can we understand the world that the subject belongs to? A thing that appears in the world appears thanks to the world. The world is an excess that allows appearances, but never itself appears in its entirety as an object of perception. This understanding of the world as a horizon can be traced back to early Husserl. Barbaras deepens this understanding by drawing on the life-world of the late Husserl, as well as on Merleau-Ponty and Patočka. In addition, Barbaras refers to Rilke to further develop this concept. The world is referred to as "the Open" (*l'Ouvert*) (Barbaras, *Introduction* 243). It is the origin of life, movement, and nature, from which the living subject emerges and to which it returns through death. The world is the ultimate belonging of the subject but, at the same time, its longing—the subject is separated from the world, and therefore lacks the fullness of the world. This lack itself makes the subject constantly transcend the things of the world in the desire for the world, which is also the dynamic of phenomenalization (of the correlational a priori).

In his earlier work, Barbaras points to the absolute point of manifestation as the "there is" ("*il y a*," "*es gibt*"):

> The only absolute is phenomenality itself—"there is" something—and like the world the subject is relative. . . . Thus one is confronted with the heretofore unknown situation of a condition that can be conditioning

> only by being situated alongside that of which it is the condition, a transcendental that is delayed with respect to itself or that has always already preceded itself, such that it is necessarily enveloped by what it constitutes, . . . there is a subject of the world only if it is inscribed in the world, only if it is incarnated. (*Desire* 82)

Although the cited text prioritizes manifestation and relativizes both the world and the subject, in *Dynamique de la manifestation* (2013) Barbaras presents a slightly different perspective. He puts into question the a priori of the correlative a priori. Therefore, he is not merely claiming the mutual presupposition and constitution of the subject and the world, starting from the absolute dimension of phenomenality. Instead, he is questioning what this situation presupposes (Barbaras, *Dynamique* 12). Therefore, this is a matter concerning the a priori of phenomenology and phenomenality itself, which goes beyond phenomenology and towards its metaphysics. In this new view, there is not one, but two absolute principles: the archi-movement and archi-life of the world and the archi-event of subjectivity. For this to be the case, the world must retain its "anonymous appearance"—it must own its appearance (Barbaras, *Dynamique* 256): "[T]he subject receives, gathers and grasps an appearance which is first anonymous—appearance for nobody, as being the world's work—and changes it in a 'subjective' appearance, that is, a perception" (Barbaras, "Exodus and Exile" 51). The event of the subject, being intrinsically unpredictable and without reason, cannot be reduced to the world. However, this event is precisely the subject, and therefore the desire, which is nothing other than the desire of the world.

Let us now turn to Jean-Luc Marion. The starting point of Marion's phenomenology is the absolute character of givenness, to which the subject is relative. Relative to the givenness is even the manifestation itself. Therefore, Marion says: "[T]he given also gives itself in the figure of the abandoned when it is deprived of intuition, either by shortage or by excess . . . if all that shows itself must first give itself, it sometimes happens that what gives itself does not succeed in showing itself" (*Being Given* 309). Marion proposes a new definition of phenomenon as that which saturates our concepts, giving more than we can grasp or withstand with our perception.

Establishing a new principle in phenomenology—"[s]o much reduction, so much givenness" (Marion, *Being Given* 3)—he grapples with the problem imposed by the very notion of principle and method. He argues that a method cannot a priori determine the extent of the reduction to givenness and proposes the notion of a "counter-method." Marion also refers to the "zigzag" and "turn" of the reduction in this context: "All

the difficulty of the reduction—and the reason it always remains to be done and redone, with neither end nor sufficient success—stems from the swerve it must make, one where it inverts itself ('zigzagging' along)" (*Being Given* 10).

In summary, both Barbaras and Marion begin with the primacy of manifestation, although they understand its dynamics differently. Marion emphasizes the absolute primacy of givenness, while Barbaras emphasizes the cobelonging of the world and the subject. They both reject the transcendental role of the subject, proposing its new understanding. The transformations of the subject can now be examined more closely, following the guiding thread of belonging and longing.

THE SUBJECT'S BELONGING

Barbaras claims that the subject's belonging to the world is only possible if the subject is alive.[3] Living flesh enables the subject to be in and of the world and to phenomenalize it. Although life appears to involve empirical determinations like metabolism and needs, its true phenomenological determination is desire. For only desire has the capacity to relate to the infinite world, opening itself to its excess, allowing it to appear not so much as an object, but precisely as the world: "Indeed, the characteristic of desire is that it delivers a presence in a way that excludes intuition: to desire is to move towards a given liberated from seeing, it's aiming for that which exceeds all presentation" (Barbaras, *La vie* 26, translation mine). Another characteristic of desire is that "the object that satisfied it intensifies it to the exact degree that it satisfies it, so that satisfaction signifies the reactivation of desire rather than its extinguishment" (Barbaras, *Desire* 110).

The living subject thus constantly receives itself from the world through desire. Moreover, desire is the very essence of the living subject. Desire is lack that can be filled by the world, but unlike a need, it grows as it is fulfilled (Barbaras, *Dynamique* 252–53). The subject's being is ecstasy, transcendence, openness, dynamism, and desire. In other words—its belonging is the same as its longing and desire. Barbaras claims:

> Thus to say that something affects me is to recognize that an indeterminate aspiration opens up a field of originary transcendence; the activity characteristic of passivity is desire. . . . It possesses only what dispossesses it; it is rejoined only in being called by an other. The birth of a "self" and the emergence of a pure exteriority do not constitute an alternative. (*Desire* 113)

[3] On Barbaras's phenomenology of life, see Gély; Riquier.

In Marion, we see a similar transformation of the subject.[4] If it is the givenness that comes first, then in relation to the subject it constitutes a "pure call," in relation to which the subject finds itself "concerned," "summoned," "puzzled." Marion says: "In classical terms, one will say that the derived and secondary category of relation, which in principle should not apply to the first category, substance, not only applies to it but subverts it; the *interloqué* discovers itself as a subject always already derived starting from a relation, a subject without subjecti(vi)ty" (*Reduction* 201). Similarly, Barbaras states that the subject's life is "essentially a life of relation: As Patočka says, the flesh's being is that of a relation and not of a thing" (*Introduction* 111, translation mine). Barbaras also refers to the world as a "pure call" (*Introduction* 238) (although "the call" does not play here such an important theoretical role as in Marion's case, who additionally insists on resisting identifying the source of the call other than givenness).

Starting from the absolute principle of givenness, Marion reduces the subject and in *Being Given* refers to the "one who comes after the subject" as "the gifted" (248). The gifted can no longer own or create a phenomenon. The gifted is just a "strict consequence of the givenness of the phenomenon" as one "to whom/which alone what gives itself shows itself" (252). Similarly, Barbaras says: "It is not because it enters into relations with a subject that the world appears; on the contrary, it is because it appears in itself that it is capable of entering into relation with a subject, of giving itself to a recipient" (*Dynamique* 234, translation mine). The gifted, like a "screen," is the place where what is given appears (Marion, *Being Given* 265). Moreover, the gifted receives itself from what he or she receives. The act and the passivity of receiving constitutes the subject itself and the phenomenalization of the given at the same time. On the screen of the subject/gifted, who is also part of the world (Barbaras), who is also given (Marion), is reflected the light of the given phenomenon that thus appears together with the subject. The screen analogy highlights the subject's passivity, while also acknowledging that the phenomenalization process depends on the gifted response. In both Marion and Barbaras work, the opposition between passivity and activity in the subject is blurred.

Another important characteristic of the subject in Marion's thought is the concept of "counter-intentionality." This concept challenges the traditionally understood intentionality and refers to the idea that the gifted is not the one constituting the phenomenon but is instead "constituted" by it as a "witness" (Marion, *Being Given* 313). The gifted is always "late" in the face of givenness: "I am without myself, late and lagging behind myself" (Marion, *Self's Place* 79). The radicality of the delay can be seen,

[4] On this topic, see e.g., Gschwandtner; Martis.

for example, in the simple facts of birth and receiving a name, where the gifted always has already received and receives itself (Marion, *Reprise* 142). This is why Marion can say that with the gifted

> it is no longer a case of understanding oneself in the nominative case (intending the object—Husserl), nor in the genitive (of Being—Heidegger), nor even in the accusative (accused by the Other—Levinas), but in terms of the dative: I receive myself from the call that gives me to myself before giving me anything whatsoever. (*Being Given* 269)

THE SUBJECT'S LONGING

If the subject receives itself from what it receives and therefore receives itself from the other, then one can question the dynamics and meaning of this receiving, which can be described as desire. According to Marion, receiving oneself from the other is ultimately receiving oneself from another "gifted." The supreme phenomenon, then, is the phenomenon of love. Similarly, Barbaras, who argues that desire is the essence of the living subject in the world, states: "Clearly, if the feeling of love can shed light on the essence of Desire, which is its condition of possibility, then conversely our phenomenology of living, insofar as it is centred on the concept of Desire, can nourish our understanding of the amorous relationship" (*Introduction* 287, translation mine). First, we will examine the role of desire in Marion, followed by Barbaras's approach. This analysis will allow us to highlight the differences in their concepts of desire.

Reduction to givenness imposes a logic of giving and receiving on phenomenalization itself, by affecting the one making the reduction. Marion claims that the elaboration of the phenomenology of givenness raises a new question: "[W]hat becomes of the gifted, when the given that he receives by receiving himself, instead of remaining a being of the world, also turns out to be another gifted?" (*Prolégomènes* 10, translation mine). He describes a "phenomenological situation" where the primary concern is not only ethical but also involves facing the Other in his "unsubstitutable particularity . . . This individuation has a name: love" (*Being Given* 324). He uses the term "erotic phenomenon" and indicates the univocality of the concept of love, which would incorporate what tradition has distinguished and even contrasted in the concepts of *eros* and *agape*.

In *The Erotic Phenomenon* Marion argues that the search for truth is not only a theoretical quest but also a personal one. He suggests that the certainty of knowledge regarding the subject itself is elusive due to

a certain excess, since we are not the object we constitute, but rather living flesh. Therefore, all possible objective knowledge "does not concern us" (*Erotic* 17). Marion poses a question that initiates an "erotic reduction." The question challenges even the "certainty" of one's own existence: "what's the use?" Marion argues that vanity, manifested in boredom and melancholy, undermines the metaphysical quest for certainty (*God* 115). The choice to love, as a means of overcoming the impasse of vanity, constitutes a certain "erotic possibility" that is indispensable to being human: "I myself can only be, from the very first, according to possibility, and thus according to radical possibility—the possibility that someone loves me or could love me" (Marion, *Erotic* 21).

Marion rejects the possibility of self-love. Love can only come from elsewhere, just as the subject receives himself from elsewhere. However, arriving at love takes place as a decision, and therefore as a desire, to love first. It is important to note that in this decision to love, according to Marion, the erotic phenomenon overcomes the two aporias of the transcendental "I" and the related problem of intersubjectivity, namely lack of individuation and solipsism. He argues that it is only through the other, who is given (giving itself) originally through the erotic phenomenon, that one can escape solipsism and achieve radical individuation. Love opens access to the other, who in turn only gives place to the self:

> The ego is not itself therefore by itself—neither by self-apprehension in self-consciousness (Descartes, at least in the common interpretation) nor by a performative (Descartes, in a less commonly accepted reading), nor by apperception (Kant), nor even by autoaffection (Henry) or anticipatory resoluteness (Heidegger). The ego does not even accede to itself *for* an other (Levinas) or *as* an other (Ricœur); rather, it becomes itself only *by* an other—in other words by a gift; for everything happens, without exception, as and by a gift . . . (Marion, *Self's Place* 285)

Let us now explore the concept of desire in Barbaras's philosophy. It is important to note that the topic of love is closely related to the dimension of desire, which is the central aspect of his phenomenology of life: "Love and desire are therefore rigorously indissociable . . . love provides the horizon for desire, or rather it is its very horizon, that kind of excess of desire over itself that allows it to move forward, that compass that never stops pointing it the path" (Barbaras, *Désir* 231, translation mine). Like Marion, Barbaras argues that love gives individuation to me and the other and highlights the ambiguity of the concept of love while rejecting premature categorization of different "types" of love (*Désir* 219).

According to Barbaras, desire leads us beyond mere objects and towards the world and life itself. It plays a central role in his phenomenological, metaphysical, and cosmological considerations:

> So, the condition of the subject difference, that is, negativity, is also the condition of its belonging to the world: as movement, the subject both inseparably differs from the world and is inscribed within it. From the same viewpoint, that of mobility, the subject is rooted in the world and foreign to it and this is why it can make the world appear. . . . This way of existing is, of course, that of desire . . . desire is always a quest for identity, a search for a restoration. This quest is necessary because the subject is separated from itself, because its identity lies outside, in otherness. (Barbaras, "Exodus and Exile" 49–50)

However—and this represents an important difference compared to Marion's philosophy—desire, and therefore love, is for Barbaras always: 1) a desire for the world: "The other can be an object of desire insofar as, in its very difference from intramundane being, it initiates us into the world" (Barbaras, *Désir* 211, translation mine); 2) desire is a desire for the self, since the subject receives the self in the other and the world; 3) desire as such is never fulfilled:

> [D]esire is not a return to the self by means of the other, but a search for the self in the other. This is why it is doomed to dissatisfaction: if the other is the place where the self emerges or is fulfilled, it is nonetheless the other and not the self. . . . the insatiability of desire, insofar as it is desire for the self, corresponds precisely to the fact that the other presents the self only as always absent. (Barbaras, *Introduction* 304, translation mine)

Let us compare these features of desire in Barbaras with analogous features in Marion: Ad 1) In Marion we also find references to the flesh and the world in the context of love. However, the focus is ultimately on the other as such. And it is not only the world but also the flesh that the other gives me. The flesh of the other in love phenomenalizes itself according to a particular mode, which is radically different from the usual mode of autoaffection, for normally I feel myself, my flesh, encountering resistance from objects. Now, however, the situation is reversed—the flesh of the other does not resist, and so gives me my proper place, "freeing me" and "allowing me to become myself" (Marion, *Erotic* 114). Marion discusses the eroticization of the flesh, which involves more than just touching an object in the world. It is a form of caressing that involves the "non-resistance of another passivity, more powerful than every activity" (*Erotic* 119). The

condition of possibility and the meaning of my flesh, and therefore of my very immanence, is the flesh of the other: "From that point forward, the other gives me what she does not have—my very flesh. And I give her what I do not have—her very flesh. . . . Each discovers him- or herself the depository of what is most intimate of the other" (*Erotic* 120–21).

In Marion's philosophy, it is not the world but the other in love that gives me my flesh. Additionally, the other also gives me the world—in reflecting on the signification of the erotic phenomenon Marion states:

> Signification does not come upon me here in a way that is like that of all the other phenomena, from the ground of the unseen and thus from the world and from its original opening; signification, when it consents to put itself into play, issues from another world—or better, not even from the world, but from the other more exterior to me than any world, because the other, too, defines the world (or indeed, henceforward he or she is the first to do so). (*Erotic* 103)

Ad 2) Marion's approach involves receiving the self only after the act of giving without reserve. In this view, the other cannot serve as an intentional intermediary to reach the self or the world. However, it is worth noting that Marion acknowledges the figure of the third person (and not the world) as a witness to love (a motif taken from Levinas's philosophy).

Ad 3) Although Marion also acknowledges that desire intensifies as it is fulfilled, it can be said that in love, or rather in its truth as "revelation," from "elsewhere" comes a certain fulfilment (see Marion, *D'ailleurs*; Marion, *Das Erscheinen*). The very question of erotic reduction—whether love is possible—and the answer as a decision to love first, is ultimately a response to the call of the other who loves me first: "In fact, for me it is never a matter of knowing if someone loved me, loves me, or will love me, but of knowing who and when" (Marion, *Erotic* 216).

CONCLUSION

Regarding the guiding thread of belonging and longing, it is important to note that the subject in the phenomenology of Barbaras and Marion differs greatly from its transcendental understanding. The role of the source and principle lies elsewhere than in the subject itself—in the principle of life, in the world, and as archi-event in Barbaras and in the principle of givenness in Marion. The focus is not on the subject constituting and possessing objects, but on the subject receiving itself, whether from the world or from givenness. The ultimate figure of this paradoxically active receptivity of the self is love and desire. The belonging of the subject is its longing, and

reciprocally in love its longing is its belonging. Although this paradoxical structure is not new—it can already be seen in Heidegger's notion of the "subject" as being-in-the-world and being-with-others—both Marion and Barbaras point out the aporias and shortcomings of Heidegger's approach, since *Dasein* carries some remnants of the transcendental role of the subject (Marion, *Being Given* 259–62; Barbaras, *Introduction* 39–46).

The difference in understanding desire between the two philosophers results in a certain difference in the interpretation of love (despite many similarities). Barbaras believes that desire is an essential characteristic of the living subject coming from and being separated from the world, while Marion views desire as a feature of erotic reduction within the horizon of givenness. For Barbaras, the other is like a window to the world and, at the same time, a window to the self. For Marion, the other is the one who, in love, reveals the true self to the subject—to use St. Augustine's formulation, to which Marion refers—*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*. Marion argues that the world, flesh and self of the subject opened and given by the other are the result of an act of love on the part of the subject—however, this act is made possible because the subject has always already received love.

The difference between Barbaras's and Marion's understanding of the subject and desire ultimately depends on preliminary considerations regarding the absolute dimension of phenomenological reduction—whether it pertains to the world and life or to the givenness. The importance of the "zigzag" pattern of phenomenology is once again highlighted. For Barbaras, the subject is never fulfilled desire of the world—it is "negativity" in comparison to the fullness of the world and at the same time the "archi-event of separation of the world from itself" (Barbaras, "Exodus and Exile" 45). For Marion, the principle of the fullness of givenness, that gives the world, life, the subject, and every other given thing, transforms the subject "with no other *subjectum* besides his capacity to receive and to receive himself from what he receives" (Marion, *Being Given* 4). In Marion, the concept of subject, desire, and love is interpreted in the horizon of giving and receiving, rather than in the cosmological and metaphysical horizon as seen in Barbaras.

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