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My Interaction with God, “I”, and Others

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The emergence of the self as a phenomenon is a reality which happens and does not happen at the same time. In one sense, the emergence of the self is something which remains a mystery as selves never know their own experience as such. In another sense, there is an experience of the self which is taken in by the world that takes away the mystery of the other’s revelation.¹ However, this difference is difficult to note in experience as what is revealed falls into the latter category of revealing in most cases. This distinction separates the “*transcendental I*” that thinks and experiences the world from the “*empirical me*” which is seen by the self and others looking at “me”.² These two realities exist together as a mystery of emerging held in tension in experience.

This tension draws people to explore God’s life as God is the primary entity that knows a human “I” as “I”.³ God and humans share incomprehensibility as the incomprehensibility of the “I” is a gift from God. Because there is a difference between “I” and “me” and also because I can never know the “I”, it leads to the reality that people can only love the unknown in others. By placing others in a “me” state, selves are not seen in an emergence consistent to the experience of a self.⁴ In other words, quantifying human existence does not make sense as it distances both the observer and the observed from their reality as mystery. The only exception to this observation is when selves see each other as the void that selves are. Selves can only see each other in charity, as charity is what enables selves to distance their observation for an embrace of the unknown other.⁵ Selves can only love the unknown as the unknown is the “invisible unsubstitutable” that is resonant with human experience as an “I”.⁶

The first step of this paper is to think through the difference between the “I” and the “me”. Marion presents a strong

¹ There is a distinction between emergence and experience which is important to note. An emergence emphasizes what really comes forth. An experience emphasizes the phenomenon as it is thought by “I”. The emergence is preferred over the experience and the goal of this paper is to demonstrate how to engage the mystery of the emergence of the “I”.

² Marion, Jean-Luc. *Mihi Magna Quaesto Factus Sum: The Privilege of Unknowing*. *The Journal of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Vol. 85 No. 1 (January 2005). 4.

³ *Ibid* 15-16.

⁴ *Ibid* 14.

⁵ Marion, Jean-Luc. *What Love Knows in Prolegomena to Charity*. Translated by Lewis, Stephen E. Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2002. 153-169. 160.

⁶ Marion, Jean-Luc. *The Intentionality of Love in Prolegomena to Charity*. Translated by Lewis, Stephen E. Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2002. 71-101, 98-99. The “invisible unsubstitutable” is the phrase Marion uses to talk about the unreserved sight of another self. It describes the experience of the other when people take a pause in identifying the other and simply focus on experiencing the “gaze” of the other.

case when he writes, “In other terms, I do not know myself insofar as I know (following the singular privilege of being, as the sole thinker, the sole knower), but in so far precisely as I am simply known, and thus by the same right as any other known, which is to say as any other object.”⁷ Marion presents a problem that exists in appearing. When a self appears, the self does not emerge as a knower or a thinker, but rather as one who is known, like a self knows about a phone. Selves quantify the emergence that comes forth in various means and as such what appears is different than the “I” who emerges having the experience of quantifying reality. Marion writes, “Rather than giving me access to the man I am, this distinction between the *I* and the *me* forbids me from drawing near to the man that I am and disfigures the very stake of anthropology – the self of each human being.”⁸ In other words, every self is more than a “me”. In thinking about the self as “me”, the “I” limits his own ability to know about himself. The more one looks at the “me”, the less one actually knows about who she really is as an “I”. This confusion creates a paradox of knowing, that in order to know oneself, one must know less about “me” and as such she will be more open to receiving the “I”.

In order to get to this desired point above, one must examine how selves know the “me” as a first step. The “me” is revealed through many types of experiences. Marion writes about knowing, “Anything else is unintelligible and thus does not come under knowing. It follows that the object is never defined in itself, but always by the thought that knows it in constructing it.”⁹ Selves know their reality based on their experience of constructing thoughts about what exists. Now, this is not to say that the objects that emerge are not real. However, this means how selves think about what emerges is based on the language built in order to describe their reality. The “me” is constructed in a similar manner. When a “me” is constructed in experience, selves construct thoughts about the “me”. These thoughts construct an object description of the “me”. For example, my red hooded sweatshirt that I like to wear is an example of a construction about me. It is a construction in two ways. First, my red hooded sweatshirt is a thought construction that describes a phenomenon that I like to wear. Second, the “me” is also constructed because my red hooded sweatshirt is connected to an image of a “me” that gets presented to myself and others who interact with me. The “me” is constructed because of the self’s ability to observe, experience, and reflect on phenomena. However, it is important to note, in constructing a “me” there is no education about “I”. Any observation about “me” falls short of recognizing myself as one who experiences the world and

⁷ Marion. *The Privilege of Unknowing*. 3-4.

⁸ *Ibid* 4. Both emphases are Marion’s.

⁹ *Ibid* 9.

reflects on it.

Another question that comes up in this distinction between the “I” and the “me” is whether there is any experience that draws out a possibility for an “I”. The experience of forgetting is one where the distinction between the “I” and the “me” plays itself out. Marion writes, “Nothing defines me more intimately than my memory... how then can I not only forget but... remember that I have forgotten that which I have, nonetheless, forgotten? How do I remember that I have forgotten what I no longer remember?”¹⁰ The process of forgetting and remembering that memories have been forgotten presents some insight on the mystery of the “I” and “me”. In experience, selves remember and crystallize events in their lives as memories. In other words, these events become part of the “me” as they are known. However, when one forgets a memory, it does not shake one’s identity as one who experiences phenomenon, but something of the “me” is lost. Marion writes,

In a single moment I clearly discover myself to be someone other than my self, I am not what I am, I become a *quaestio* for myself. The experience of self ends neither in the aporia of substituting an object (the self, the *me*) for the *I* that I am, nor in the pure identity with self, but in the alienation of self from self—I am myself an other than *I*.¹¹

Forgetting a memory is an experience of the separation between “I” and “me” because in forgetting, the self becomes distant to her self. The object of one’s memory can no longer be retrieved when one forgets, so the “me” loses what has been received through emergence, but the “I” remains the same because the self can remember that she has forgotten.

The “me” is inadequate to describe the self as what is “me” can disappear when forgotten. Therefore, there needs to be more to identity than the “me”, because there is always some sense of “I” that does not disappear, even when particular memories or experiences are forgotten. The “I” presents an experience of the self that remains hidden, but yet resonates with the experience of being a self. This continuing sense of mystery provides rich insight for the theological tradition as it preserves a special quality about humanity. Also, mystery allows a reflection on the self to move toward God

¹⁰ Ibid 6.

¹¹ Ibid 7.

as a mutual embrace between people and the God who is mystery. Marion writes,

However, Adam has the power thus to name only that which can legitimately become for him an object: the animals (and the rest of the world), and perhaps the angels, but not God and not himself. If, moreover, he claimed to name them, either this name would have no validity, or, if it had validity, what he name

would not be man as such (as the unrivaled thinker) but merely a thought-object like all the others.”¹²

The mystery of God and selves comes from having an experience of both God and selves and yet never having an understanding of either. Mystery in this sense is a positive attribute as it

engages the tension between the self’s experience of a mysterious yet concrete experience in the world. In other words, mystery is helpful because it sets a standard of relationship and familiarity for God and humans to have a relationship. It also gives a concrete yet distant way of explaining how the self is in the image of God. The concreteness comes from the fact that it is possible to think about the image of God in mystery as a concept. However, the distance comes when we think about how the language expresses a reality too real to grasp. Whenever a phenomenon emerges the “I” has an experience that is distant from anything with which the “me” might respond. This tension of experience corresponds to a healthy relationship of mystery and presence in the self’s relationship with God, the self, and others. A sense of mystery enables selves to recognize their own dignity as it draws people to God’s life. In other words, mystery enables people to be seen as holy just as God is holy.¹³

However, it is important to note the problems that occur when the tension between “I” and “me” is not preserved. Marion writes,

Not because he would no longer be thought, but precisely because one thinks him by not thinking of him, because one thinks him without beginning the thinking from him himself but, instead, beginning from the one other than him, namely, from the mind that defines him by alienating him, which is to say the mind that thinks him according to the mode of

¹² Ibid 10.

¹³ Ibid 16.

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comprehension.¹⁴

When selves are defined by certain experiences, they become isolated from themselves and do not emerge as an “I”. This destroys the mystery of being a self, because there is too much emphasis on the experience of the other as what appears rather than what emerges. In every encounter with another self, what is really emerging is another “I” capable of experiencing and thinking through emergences. There are catastrophic consequences when selves focus too much on what appears, i.e. the “me”, and do not focus on the emergence of the “I” as one who experiences.

Selves are able to dehumanize each other and their own selves because of an overemphasis on what appears. Marion writes, “What is a man? More threatening indeed, because even and above all if we cannot give an answer, we nevertheless easily authorize ourselves to use the question negatively, transforming it into a final question, ‘Is this [still, truly] a man?’”¹⁵ This question strikes at the destructive behaviors that arise in life. If one can ask the question whether another self is truly human, it means the asker has missed an important part of the emergence of the other “I”. By asking about the humanity of the other in a negative light it provides an impetus to do harm to another self or one’s own self. Marion continues, “In order to kill a human being, it is necessary to have the permission to kill. But in order to have that, it is first necessary to be able to deny to such and such a human being (the well named “So and So”) his or her face and thus his or her humanity.”¹⁶ When the question of selfhood is asked in a negative light, it becomes possible to cause harm as the focus is placed on what appears, rather than the emergence of a self that can think and experience the world. In other words, harm to the other, and harm to my own self is possible because selves privilege their own thoughts about the experience of the other self. My own self can be other to me, and the “I” can present a projection of “me” that is undesirable, and the same reality can happen with the self to others.

This situation of harm to self and others is an important need to address. Love is an antidote to harm both in the self and with others. If harm is caused by defining the self as “me” rather than letting the “I” emerge, then love can arise if the “I” is privileged in relationships to other selves. To get to this solution it is necessary to think through how to resist defining others in relationship to the “I’s” experience and cognition of others.

The first step in resisting definition of others is to resist defining one’s own self and having that definition influence self-hatred. Self-hatred affects how people view themselves in the midst of existing in the world, but also affects how individuals seek God in relationship. Scripture provides a good example of the phenomenon of self-hatred,

¹⁴ Ibid 11.

¹⁵ Ibid 11.

¹⁶ Ibid 13.

But Moses said to the Lord, ‘O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.’ Then the Lord said to him, ‘Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.’ But he said, ‘O my Lord, please send someone else.’ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, ‘What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him.’¹⁷

This story takes place in the middle of a discussion between God and Moses about the means of redemption for the early Israelite people. God wants Moses to lead the Israelite people and Moses is extremely hesitant. Moses does not feel good enough to serve God because he sees his lack of speech as something which will inhibit the message of God. He makes this observation because he sees others who speak better than he does, and this experience makes Moses apprehensive to speak for God. Moses believes his lack of speech hinders his ability to interact for God to the people and as such is a dehumanizing quality. It is the perception of bad speech that causes his self-hatred and feeling of unworthiness to interact for God to the people. Moses’ fear leads him to question God. This is not necessarily sinful as asking a question of God enables discussion and examination of possibilities; therefore, it is a challenge that stems out of fear of his own lack.

However, God has an answer to Moses’ question, “Am I good enough?” God provides the means of speech through his brother Aaron and affirms Moses’ worth to work for God regardless of what Moses observes in others’ perceptions of him. God is not looking at Moses’ experience when God

¹⁷ Exodus 4:10-16. All scripture citations are from the NRSV. Scripture commentary in this paper will utilize a narrative analysis of the text. A narrative reading of a text is one which searches for the message of a story by examining how an “implied reader” would respond. (Powell, Mark Allan. *What is Narrative Criticism?* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. 19.) Narrative criticism looks at the author, the text, and the reader as all being integral parts of the text, and therefore focuses heavily on the text itself. While narrative criticism does not ignore the historical-critical method, the text itself is the means of entering the world of the story (Ibid 20).

makes his choice. In the Hebrew Bible, God selects the unlikely person to serve to show the power of God.¹⁸ Moses is unlikely because of his speech impediment. Also, God gives the faculty of intuition, so God knows how Moses is reacting to his environment. Moses is beginning to get upset at the treatment of the Israelite people.¹⁹ God does not see the unworthiness of self that Moses sees; rather God sees this desire to do something about the situation and plight of the Israelites and wants to be a guide for the desire to have a good result. This interaction changes how Moses sees himself because he is not guided by self-hatred as he acts in the first half of the Book of Exodus to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. God wants Moses to not think about what he sees in himself, but rather wants Moses to embrace the mystery of God's providence and the mystery of his own self and potential for leadership. However, another problem can emerge in thinking about oneself when one embraces too much of an image of oneself.

Narcissism is an embrace of an image that is put forth that does not embrace the mystery of one's self. Narcissistic behavior creates potential problems in thinking about love as it does not embrace mystery. Narcissism enables a theory of egoism where people overvalue something that is not who a self really is, in other words, narcissism embraces a "me" and not an "I".

Narcissism is extreme self-love, which gets stuck on love of the experience of one's "me" and does not move to the actual existence of mystery. A person because of his environment can learn and exhibit narcissistic behavior and love himself and exclude others. Narcissistic behavior focuses on the parts of him that he finds better than others. However, this ignores the unknown which is present in his self and others.

Narcissism displays itself as pride. The triumphalism of the self may be a consequence of self-hatred by not wanting to deal with areas of weakness. Some people in seeing areas of weakness might respond with anger at their weakness and thus present the stronger parts of the experience of themselves in a prideful and aggressive manner. Thus, narcissism could simply be a cry for help from a self who cannot deal with his own self-hatred. In the end, narcissistic love

¹⁸ See 1 Samuel 3 when Samuel was called as a young boy in the temple. 1 Samuel 16:12-13 when Jesse's youngest Son David was anointed as king. See also, Luke 1:26-38 where Mary is a virgin with child and her older relative Elizabeth also has a child past the time when she is supposed to be able to have a child.

¹⁹ Exodus 2-3.

is disordered because there is not a proper end to this love. Narcissism promotes a love based on an image of "me"; thus, doing two related things. 1) Narcissistic love takes out the ability to love mystery. Because of a lack of embracing mystery, it does not remain open to others. 2) By taking out the potential of loving mystery, people are less aware of their own effects on their mutual interfacing with the world. What is unknown in others is necessary as it inspires love; narcissism displaces the importance of the other and emphasizes only thoughts about one's "me", which takes away from what is lovable about others.

When thinking about narcissism, Marion believes that it is impossible to love the self because it makes the question, "does anybody love me?" impossible to answer.²⁰ Marion's definition of love is other-centered and no apparent other is able to respond to the question, "does anybody love me?"²¹ However, Marion also notes, "Only a moralism of scarcity could require that one deduct from oneself the

love (and thus the being) that one can bear toward an other – since on the contrary, I will never love anyone if I do not succeed first in loving myself, even if only a little bit."²² Marion believes self-love is necessary for all other forms of love.²³ However, Marion also believes that continuing to be without assurance that someone loves "me" is hard to do for a long period of time.²⁴ Thus it becomes a circle, selves need self-love in order to love others, yet selves also need support and love from others to feel affirmed.

Acknowledging one's need for affirmation allows one to receive not just self-love but God's love as God is the one who grants self-love. Marion writes, "If I had, strangely, to lay claim to loving myself, I would thus have to assure myself by myself of an authority who surpasses, by far, my own expectation and my own lack, so as not only to give me assurance, but above all to reassure that very assurance."²⁵ Self-love is not something that selves can receive on their own as

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²⁰ Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*. 44-47.

²¹ Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*. Translated by: Lewis, Stephen E. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002, 75. Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*. 45.

²² Marion. *The Erotic Phenomenon*. 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

they cannot grant their own assurance of their good. In other words, selves cannot grant their own “*excess*”.¹ Therefore, this “*excess*” needs to come from somewhere else. God grants this “*excess*” by creating selves as ones who share in the mystery of God, by being mystery themselves. As such, in defining one’s own self, there must be care to preserve mystery as this allows people to share in excess and thus in God’s life.

Resisting self-hatred and narcissism allows for self-love because it is an embrace of the mystery of the self. This mystery is more resonant with one’s own reality. The reality of the “I” is an “*excess*” given by God, who invites “I” into God’s own life of mystery. This allows for an “I” to approach the “invisible unsubstitutable” of his own self. In other words, because of God, “I” can embrace my own mystery. “I” can embrace myself as one who is irreplaceable, because the only thing “I” can see when looking at myself is mystery. “I” am not capable of any clarity in thinking about my own self, except for the clarity of being a mystery. Scripture gives some insight on self-acceptance.

Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’²

Human persons are different because the man has the ability to name other entities with names unlike his own. Animals and birds do not have a similarity to human persons

¹ Ibid 46. “*Excess*” refers to something greater than oneself that assures the good of a particular self. This always has to come from some greater other as selves cannot add more to their existence, but grow more into themselves in experiencing and thinking about phenomenon.

² Genesis 2:18-23.

that merits a similar name. Seeing this lack of community, God takes part of the man and makes a woman. The self-acceptance of a human self comes from the gift to be a mystery in the midst of all creation.

The author does not have to present the question “Am I good enough?” because this story happened before the human fall into sin. Therefore, it is a graced humanity which does not know the stain of

sin. A graced humanity without sin provides insight on self-acceptance and acceptance of another. Without sin, the two humans can see each other more as they are, because self-hatred has not become part of the equation. Self-hatred can only occur if there is a noticeable lack in persons. Self-hatred causes people to not embrace the mystery of themselves, and thus they act out against themselves and others. The gift of self-acceptance comes from an embrace of mystery in knowing that there is a difference between people and animals.

The man could name all of the other animals and birds different names as they were not made in the same mystery as the human person. However, there is a similarity to the being that was created from the man. In understanding this similarity, man gives a name to this other being, woman, which places her as one similar to the man, even without a textual interaction. Though the man is giving a name to the woman, her name is one that shares in mystery. The name is not one of distance, but rather of a common sharing in the mystery of God and each other. Genesis provides commentary on not just my own acceptance, but acceptance of the other as well.

“I” can accept others because others share in a common “*excess*” given by God. Marion writes, “Gazing on the other as such, my eyes in the black of his own, does not imply encountering another object, but experiencing the other of object. My gaze, for the first time, sees an invisible gaze that sees it.”³ The recognition that another self is seeing “I” and seeing what “I” do to her is a reminder of the common humanity shared by all selves. The mutual exchange of gazes is a meeting of mystery, because “I” no longer see another from my thoughts, but “I” experience an emergence of the other as “I” who is seeing “I”. Seeing the black part of the other’s eye is a subtle but deep mystery of the reality of the other “I” as an emergence. The black of the other’s eye is symbolic of mystery, as it is a physical symbol of nothingness, of open potential and experiencing. In other words, the “I” sees the “invisible unsubstitutable” of the other in the mutual exchange of “gazes”.⁴ This emergence is guided by God as God is the one who grants the “*excess*” of each self and as

³ Marion, Jean-Luc. *The Intentionality of Love*. 82

⁴ Ibid.

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such enables selves to draw together to themselves and God in recognizing mystery.

The human self is a transcendent reality that is shrouded in mystery. Selves are those who experience and think through their interaction with the world. This experience of cognition and experience remains invisible to selves in their own reflecting activities. However, selves must resist the temptation to define others in the light of their own experiencing and cognition, because every other is hidden from thought. In other words, there is a separation of the person who experiences and thinks and what is thought. This separation between “I” and “me” is a mystery that is important to preserve as too much emphasis on the “me” causes harm

both in the self and with others. This harm stems from the reality that any observation about another self is not consistent with the other’s reality as an experiencing and thinking self. This allows selves to dehumanize both themselves and others because the experience of one’s cognition of the other allows the observer to make a judgment about the humanity of the other self. In order to prevent the impetus for harm, one has to think about how to encourage self-love. Self-love is something which is a transcendent gift, as selves cannot provide their own gift of self-worth. The “*excess*” of the self is a gift that draws selves into the mystery of God and the self. In this way, human selves share in mystery of God, and embrace dignity as human selves are mystery themselves.

Adam Fitzpatrick is currently a third-year graduate student in the Master of Theology program at Saint John’s School of Theology Seminary while also finishing a Master of Arts in Theology with a concentration in Systematic Theology. His scholarly interests revolve around how postmodern philosophy resonates with theological ethics. He enjoys working in deconstruction and with the retrieval of theological concepts utilizing the tools of philosophy.