

# Sartre and Marion on Intentionality and Phenomenality

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## Abstract

This article offers a reading of Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenology in light of Jean-Luc Marion's more recent phenomenology. It may seem odd to compare Sartre to Marion, given that Sartre is well-known for his avowed atheism and his account of intentionality while Marion is primarily known for his work on religious phenomena and counter-intentionality. However, this article shows that there are many ways in which Sartre anticipates Marion's work on phenomenological reduction and excessive phenomenality. By reading Sartre's phenomenology in light of Marion's, and particularly Sartre's analysis of the viscous slime in *Being and Nothingness* in relation to Marion's account of 'saturated phenomena', this article presents a fresh interpretation of Sartre as a phenomenologist who has invaluable insights not only on the structures of consciousness and phenomenality, but also for the contemporary theoretical interest in the relationship between human and nonhuman entities.

## Keywords

consciousness, givenness, intentionality, Jean-Luc Marion, phenomenology, Jean-Paul Sartre, viscosity

Much of recent French phenomenology has taken a strong interest in religion and theology, often described as having taken what Dominique Janicaud (2000) calls a 'theological turn' or what Christina Gschwandtner (2018) terms a 'turn to excess'. Aside from the analysis of religious phenomena, one common interest shared by practising Christian phenomenologists associated with this recent 'turn', such as Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry, is a strong focus on phenomena whose phenomenality are in 'excess' of the usual expectations of subjective experience, which in turn problematize the traditional Husserlian definition of consciousness in terms of intentionality. Put differently, what we find in this 'turn' is not just a turn away from the traditional

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phenomenological focus on intentionality as the structure and definition of human consciousness and subjectivity, but more positively what Gschwandtner (2018: 456) describes as ‘a more radical return to the things themselves’ which ‘allow[s] them to give themselves on their own terms, to flood us with their intuitive givenness rather than being constituted, constructed, defined, and limited by our intentionality’.

This article offers a reading of Jean-Paul Sartre’s early phenomenology, particularly his analysis of the viscous slimy ‘thing’ in *Being and Nothingness*, in light of this ‘radical return to the things themselves’ in contemporary phenomenology. Sartre’s cryptic account of the viscous slime has received much interest in contemporary social and cultural theory, from Sara Ahmed’s (2014: 89–92) feminist affect theory to Timothy Morton’s (2013: 27–37) object-oriented eco-theory to Brian McNely’s (2019) theory of ambient rhetoric. However, these theoretical treatments of Sartre’s viscous slime are often primarily speculative or metaphorical in manner, and largely underplay the phenomenological analysis of human experience central to Sartre’s original account. By reading Sartre’s analysis of the slime through Marion’s ‘phenomenality-oriented’ (as opposed to ‘subject-oriented’) account of phenomenology, this article seeks to highlight the important phenomenological insights of Sartre’s analysis of the viscous as well as the ways in which Sartre’s early phenomenology anticipates and parallels Marion’s later account of the ‘saturated phenomenon’. Accordingly, this article’s comparative reading of Sartre and Marion can not only help us re-assess the trajectory of the phenomenological tradition with regard to its ‘theological turn’ to ‘excess’; it can also supplement the contemporary discussion of Sartre’s notion of the viscous slime and how the Sartrean analysis of nonhuman phenomena can potentially contribute to the increasing theoretical interest in the status or even ‘agency’ of inanimate things in recent social and cultural studies.

After briefly summarizing the basic tenets of Sartre’s phenomenology (Section I), this article offers a reading of Sartre’s notion of ‘being in-itself’ – what he also calls ‘the being of phenomena’ in the introduction to *Being and Nothingness* – as an account of phenomenality in relation to Marion’s account of phenomenological reduction and givenness (Section II). Furthermore, the article argues that the ambiguous figure of the viscous slime which Sartre analyses in the final chapter of *Being and Nothingness* is an instance of what Marion would call a saturated phenomenon insofar as it epitomizes the character of phenomenality as pure ‘givenness’ (Section III). Finally, this article concludes by highlighting how these elements of Sartre’s atheistic works can not only illuminate various aspects and presuppositions of Marion’s supposed ‘theological’

turn to ‘excess’, but also how phenomenological inquiry can relate to contemporary social and cultural critique.

## I Intentionality

In his landmark critique of the ‘theological turn’ in French phenomenology, Janicaud (2000: 18) argues that ‘the most significant text [in the original reception of Husserlian phenomenology in France] is brief, but dazzling. It is signed “Sartre” and entitled “Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology”.’ In these few short pages written in January 1939, Sartre highlights the centrality of ‘intentionality’ in Husserl’s phenomenology. According to Sartre (1970: 5), Husserl’s notion of intentionality refers to the ‘necessity for consciousness to exist as consciousness of something other than itself’. For Sartre, insofar as intentional consciousness is always conscious *of* something that is *other than* itself or indeed *outside* itself, what Husserl’s account of the intentional character of consciousness accomplishes is nothing less than a ‘purification’ of consciousness:

All at once consciousness is purified, it is clear as a strong wind. There is nothing in it but a movement of fleeing itself, a sliding beyond itself ... for consciousness has no ‘inside’. It is just this being beyond itself, this absolute flight, this refusal to be a substance which makes it a consciousness. (Sartre, 1970: 5)

However, in Sartre’s reading, Husserl himself fails to realize the full implications of his own insight. Critiquing Husserl’s rendition of consciousness in terms of a transcendental subject or ‘ego’ in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (written around the same time as his essay on intentionality), Sartre (1972: 38) argues that ‘phenomenology does not need to appeal to any such unifying and individualizing *I* precisely because ‘consciousness is defined by intentionality’. For Sartre, the very fact that consciousness is defined by nothing other than intentionality means that there cannot be a ‘transcendental *I* or inner self that sits ‘behind each consciousness [as] a necessary structure of consciousness’ (p. 37). Because if consciousness is always conscious *of* something that is *other than* itself, and if consciousness is conscious *of* an ‘*I*’ (e.g. when a conscious being consciously says ‘*I* think’), this ‘*I*’ must be something that is *other than* consciousness. As such, for Sartre, consciousness is properly intentional and conscious if and only if it is ‘*without an I*’ (pp. 36, 41): There is no room for an ‘*I*’ in consciousness. It is only when consciousness is ‘purified of all egological structure’ that we can realize the true intentional character of consciousness (p. 93): ‘This absolute

consciousness, when it is purified of the *I*, no longer has anything of the *subject*' (p. 106).

This 'empty' conception of intentional consciousness is further developed in *Being and Nothingness*:

[A]ll consciousness is consciousness *of* something. In other words, there is no [act of] consciousness that does not *posit* a transcendent object or, if you prefer, consciousness has no 'content' . . . [Thus] it is a pure 'appearance', where this means it exists only to the extent to which it appears . . . consciousness is pure appearance, because it is a total void (since the entire world is outside it). (Sartre, 2020: 9–10, 16, original emphasis)

It is for this reason that Sartre (2020: 140, 229–30, 594, 807) characterizes consciousness as 'nothingness' or 'for-itself' (*pour-soi*) in *Being and Nothingness*: consciousness always exists *in relation to* – or indeed it exists *for* (*pour*) – some being that is beyond and other than consciousness; consciousness is *nothing* but a relation to some phenomenon that is 'in-itself' (*en-soi*). These two ontological categories of 'in-itself' and 'for-itself' – 'being' and 'consciousness' – are respectively the two notions that are named in the title of his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*. As the names of 'being' and 'nothingness' indicate, these two ontological categories are strictly mutually exclusive: there cannot be a being that is both in-itself and for-itself – what Sartre (2020: 480) calls an 'in-itself-for-itself'.

However, Sartre notes that the 'in-itself-for-itself' is nonetheless an ideal that is fervently desired by consciousness. In fact, this ideal which consciousness desires is what Sartre calls 'God', as Sartre (2020: 735) writes in a well-known passage in *Being and Nothingness*:

[T]he in-itself-for-itself [is] the ideal of a consciousness that could be the foundation of its own being-in-itself purely by means of its own being conscious of itself. To this ideal, we can give the name 'God'. So we can say the best way to conceive of human-reality's fundamental project is to regard man as the being whose project is to be God.

The 'in-itself-for-itself' is seen as the ideal of the for-itself because it is within the intentional character of consciousness for-itself to wish to grasp and comprehend the in-itself which it is *not*.

For Sartre, the for-itself's desire to fully grasp and comprehend being in-itself is inherently futile. Such a desire to become 'God' or 'in-itself-for-itself' is, in Sartre's (2020: 797) famous words, 'a useless passion' for 'man loses himself as man' in order to become God. Because for Sartre, it is ontologically impossible for there to be a complete unity or coincidence of the for-itself and in-itself: For *if* the for-itself could fully grasp the

in-itself, it would by definition no longer be for-itself – as there will no longer be a transcendent being in-itself for it be conscious *of*. Without anything to be conscious *of*, the for-itself can no longer exist as consciousness – it is no longer intentional: ‘*it destroys itself*’ (Sartre, 1970: 5, original emphasis). The structure of conscious intentionality lies at the very heart of Sartre’s ontology as well as his philosophical affirmation of the impossibility of God’s existence (see Leung, 2020).

As alluded to above, this centrality of intentional consciousness is no longer found in the later phenomenological tradition after the ‘theological turn’, such as works by Marion as well as other religious phenomenologists like Michel Henry (see Calcagno, 2008). In fact, in contradistinction to his predecessors’ focus on intentionality in the phenomenological tradition,<sup>1</sup> what we find in Marion’s phenomenological account of the saturated phenomenon is an emphasis on *non-intentional* intuition or even what Marion enigmatically calls ‘counter-intentionality’. But before further examining Marion’s much discussed notion of saturated phenomena and its ‘counter-intentional’ features, a few words ought to be said about Marion’s broader understanding of the task of phenomenology.

## II Phenomenality

Instead of intentionality, Marion (1998) sees the method of ‘reduction’ as the core feature of phenomenology and that the phenomenological tradition is marked by a series of breakthroughs in the development of this method. For Marion, the towering figures of Husserl and Heidegger respectively represent (the first) two stages of this development. Whereas Husserl’s ‘first reduction’ allows the transcendental subject to apprehend *objects* as correlates of noetic acts of consciousness, Heidegger’s ‘second reduction’ shifts the phenomenological focus from beings to the Being of beings – from the phenomena of beings to the phenomenon of ‘*Being* itself’ (Marion, 1998: 204). Despite the breakthroughs of their ‘first’ and ‘second’ reductions, Marion (2008: 14) argues that both Husserl and Heidegger ultimately took for granted ‘the principle of horizon’ prevalently presumed in the phenomenological tradition. According to Marion (2002a: 39–61), by respectively imposing the *a priori* (i.e. extra-phenomenological) conceptual limits of ‘object’ and ‘Being’ onto phenomena, Husserl and Heidegger remained captive respectively to the ‘horizons’ of what he calls ‘objectness’ (*objectité*) and ‘beingness’ (*étantité*). As opposed to objectness and beingness, Marion (2008: 80–1) argues instead that all phenomena and indeed the structure of *phenomenality* itself are fundamentally characterized by *givenness* (*donation*) – the very fact that a phenomenon is *given* to consciousness.

Bringing together Husserl’s notion of ‘givenness’ (*Gegebenheit*) and Heidegger’s definition of phenomenon as ‘that which shows itself in

itself' (*das Sich-an-ihm-selbst-zeigende*), Marion (2002a: 68–70) argues that a phenomenon ought to be simply defined as that which shows itself inasmuch as it *gives* itself. For Marion, it is only when phenomenology moves from the analyses of various phenomena to inquire into the very structure of *phenomenality* as such that the phenomenological tradition can arrive at what he calls the 'third reduction' of reducing phenomena to the phenomenality of pure givenness. While Marion seeks to undertake the task of the 'third reduction' with his account of the saturated phenomenon (further examined below), a similar 'reduction' beyond Husserl's and Heidegger's can be found in Sartre's dense introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, which opens with the very proposition that modern thought has made considerable progress by '*reducing [réduisant] the existent to the series of appearances that manifest it*' (Sartre, 2020: 1, emphasis added).

In the opening sections of his introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (2020: 1–7) seeks to delineate 'the phenomenon of being' from 'the being of phenomena'. Not dissimilar to Marion's stages of phenomenological reduction, Sartre notes that while the great contribution Husserl's 'return to things themselves' made to philosophy was the abolishment of the dualism between being and appearance (p. 2), Heidegger moves beyond Husserl by reducing the phenomena of individual beings or objects such as tables and chairs to the phenomenon of 'Being' itself (pp. 6–7).<sup>2</sup> However, for Sartre, Heidegger's phenomenological reduction ultimately remains at the level of 'the phenomenon of being' instead of 'the being of phenomena'. In other words, Heidegger fails to ask the more 'reduced' question of what *is* a phenomenon or indeed the condition and foundation of phenomenality per se. Sartre writes:

Of course, I can surpass this table or this chair toward its being, and I can pose the question of the table-being or chair-being. But in that moment I look away from the table-phenomenon in order to fasten on the being-phenomenon, which is no longer the condition of all disclosure but which is itself something disclosed, and appearance which, as such, needs in its turn some being on whose foundation it could be disclosed. (p. 7)

According to Sartre, 'the phenomenon of being' is *not* 'the being of phenomena', but rather something which 'requires, insofar as it is a phenomenon, a transphenomenal foundation' (p. 7).

For Sartre, 'the being of phenomena' is precisely this transphenomenal foundation which discloses phenomena to consciousness. In this regard, it may be said that this 'condition of all disclosure' which Sartre calls 'the being of phenomena' is a structure akin to what Marion (2005: 131) calls 'the phenomenality of all phenomena' – which Marion sees as the ultimate goal of phenomenological reduction.<sup>3</sup> Just as the transphenomenal

foundation of all phenomena is not reducible to any particular phenomenon, Sartre (2020: 7) notes that ‘the being of the phenomenon cannot be reduced [*réduire*] to the phenomenon of being’. The transphenomenal condition of all phenomena is not itself a phenomenon. The being of phenomena is for Sartre ‘the condition of all disclosure: it is being-in-order-to-disclose, not being-disclosed [as a phenomenon itself]’ (p. 7). Thus, instead of reducing ‘the being of phenomena’ to ‘the phenomenon of being’, what Sartre seeks to undertake in *Being and Nothingness* is a phenomenological reduction of ‘the phenomenon of being’ to ‘the being of phenomena’ – reducing phenomena to the very structure of *phenomenality* as such.

One reason why Sartre insists that the being of the phenomenon cannot be reduced to the phenomenon of being is because ‘knowledge’ (*connaissance*) cannot account for the being of phenomena. As Sebastian Gardner (2009: 43) points out: ‘knowledge, as Sartre understands it, involves “determining a thing in concepts”, and anything that we determine in concepts can only be a phenomenon.’ Sartre’s ‘reduction’ of phenomena to *the being of* phenomena – of phenomena to ‘transphenomenal’ phenomenality – is thus a suspension and bracketing of the horizon of conceptual knowledge not unlike Marion’s ‘third reduction’.<sup>4</sup> However, for Sartre, just because ‘knowledge’ cannot account for the phenomenality of phenomena does not mean that we can have no access to the ‘transphenomenal’ being of phenomena at all:

although the being of the phenomenon is coextensive with the phenomenon it must escape the phenomenal condition in which existence is possible only to the extent that it is revealed, and consequently that it overflows and founds any knowledge we can have of it. (Sartre, 2020: 7)

As something that is *transphenomenal*, for Sartre (2020: 25–7) the being of phenomena cannot be limited by any principles we derive from our phenomenological experience (such as causality). As such, Sartre states that the being of phenomena – that which he also calls being in-itself (*en soi*) – is ‘*without any reason* for being or any relationship with any other being’ (p. 29, emphasis added). Sartre’s (2020: 25) emphasis on the inexplicability of ‘the being-in-itself of phenomena’ is thus not dissimilar to Marion’s insistence that phenomenology is strictly incompatible with the principle of sufficient reason of traditional metaphysics.

According to Marion, one of the main contributions of Husserl’s phenomenology is to define phenomena simply by *the fact* that they are given:

[Husserl] recognizes the given as such *by the simple fact* that it is given ... *the fact of being given* to consciousness (in whatever

manner) testifies to the right of phenomena to be received as such, that is to say, as they give themselves. To return to the things themselves amounts to recognizing phenomena as themselves, without submitting them to the (sufficient) condition of an anterior authority (such as thing in itself, cause, principle, etc.). In short, it means liberating them from any prerequisite other than their simple givenness. (Marion, 2008: 4–5, emphasis added)

With this liberation from all preconditions aside from givenness, Marion argues that Husserl's phenomenological focus on the *fact* – as opposed to the reason – of the givenness of phenomena entails nothing less than 'a suspension of the principle of sufficient reason insofar as the phenomenon is not indebted to any reason, because its givenness itself justifies it'. For Marion (2008: 5), 'any phenomenon is without *why*, since any phenomenon is as it gives itself'.

In Marion's view, this suspension of the principle of sufficient reason is best expressed in the phenomenon of the gift. Arguing that the gift only 'takes on its full meaning in the very absence of motive and sufficient reason' (Marion, 2005: 114), Marion notes:

A phenomenon shows *itself* all the more as itself, in that it gives *itself* on the basis of itself ... The gift shows itself on the basis of itself because, like every other phenomenon, it gives *itself* on the basis of itself, but also because, more radically than every other phenomenon, it gives its *self* on the basis of *itself*. The gift that gives (itself) gives only on the basis of itself ... this phenomenon manifests itself and gives itself as it gives – *of itself*, on the basis of itself alone, without any other reason than itself. (Marion, 2005: 126, original emphasis)

Marion's account of the gift (which is partly a critical response to Derrida) is complicated and nuanced (see Marion, 2002a: 71–118), but to the extent that Marion (2005: 128) holds that the gift 'has no recourse to any cause, nor to any reason, other than the pure demand of givenness that it show itself as it gives itself', we can see why he suggests the gift may be regarded as 'the figure of all phenomenality' (Marion, 2005: 131; 2010: 112).

As opposed to the principle of sufficient reason, Marion (2002a: 184) argues that phenomenology subscribes to 'a principle of sufficient *intuition*': 'To justify its right to appear, intuition is enough for the phenomenon, without any other reason; it is enough for it to be given in and through intuition – according to a principle of sufficient intuition'. For Marion, this principle is exemplified in what he calls 'saturated phenomena' – phenomena that are 'saturated with intuition' (p. 4). While Marion



holds that the structure of phenomenality as ‘givenness’ or self-giving (*se donner*) is shared by all phenomena, he also states that it finds its paradigmatic expression in saturated phenomena (p. 227). To quote Marion at some length:

To be sure, not all phenomena get classified as saturated phenomena, but all saturated phenomena accomplish the one and only paradigm of phenomenality ... Because it gives itself without condition or restraint, the saturated phenomenon would offer the paradigm of the phenomenon finally without reserve ... by giving itself absolutely, the saturated phenomenon also gives itself as absolute – free from any analogy with already seen, objectified, comprehended experience. It is freed because it does not depend on any horizon. In every case, it does not depend on this condition of possibility par excellence – a horizon, whatever it might be. (Marion, 2002a: 227, 218, 211–12)

According to Marion, the saturated phenomenon ‘lets givenness come before all limitation and every horizon’, and as such, phenomenality is expressed in the saturated phenomenon ‘first in terms of givenness, such that the phenomenon no longer gives itself in the measure to which it shows itself, but shows itself in the measure (or, eventually, lack of measure) to which it gives itself’ (p. 226).

As mentioned above, saturated phenomena are for Marion (2002a: 4) phenomena that are saturated with intuition, marked by ‘the excess of intuition over intention’:

intuition is not bound to and by the intention, but is freed from it ... intuition subverts, therefore precedes, every intention, which it exceeds and decenters ... here the *I* of intentionality can neither constitute nor synthesize the intuition into an object defined by a horizon. (Marion, 2002: 225–6)

The saturated phenomenon is not only free of being limited by any prior horizons or conceptual frameworks (be it Husserlian objectness or Heideggerian beingness) but, moreover, Marion (2008: 13–14) argues that it calls into question the centrality of the human *I* which the phenomenological tradition has upheld ‘as the origin of intentionality’ which ‘constitutes objects according to its axis of intentionality’. In fact, according to Marion (2002a: 216), the saturated phenomenon ‘not only suspends the phenomenon’s subjection to the *I*; it inverts it. For, far from being able to constitute this phenomenon, the *I* experiences itself as constituted by it’.

In Marion’s (2002a: 175, 266–7, 283) words, what one experiences in an encounter with a saturated phenomenon is what he calls a ‘counter-

intentionality’, for every saturated phenomenon always ‘inverts intentionality’ (p. 267) – an idea which Marion explicitly acknowledges is indebted to Emmanuel Levinas’ account of ‘the Other’ (pp. 266–7, 269).<sup>5</sup> The saturated phenomenon reverses one’s normal expectation to be able to direct or ‘intend’ one’s intentionality at the phenomenon and render it an object; instead of ‘apprehending’ the phenomenon, one is now captivated or indeed apprehended by the phenomenon.<sup>6</sup> For Marion, the experience – or, more properly, what he calls ‘counter-experience’ – of saturated phenomena unsettles and calls into question the conditions of experience that are normally assumed under the paradigm of transcendental subjectivity:

The hypothesis of saturated phenomena never consisted in annulling or overcoming the conditions for the possibility of experience, but rather sought to examine whether certain phenomena contradict or exceed those conditions yet nevertheless still appear, precisely by exceeding or contradicting them ... Thus, far from it does nothing but counteract experience understood in the transcendental sense as the subsuming of intuition under the concept. (Marion, 2008: 133, 136)

In other words, the ‘counter-experiential’ encounter with saturated phenomena shows us that there are aspects of experience that cannot be objectified or contained within the narrow confines of intentionality. Not unlike Sartre’s (2020: 7) aforementioned proposition that the being of phenomena ‘overflows’ any knowledge we can have of it, Marion’s formulation of the saturated phenomenon is marked by its phenomenal excess over the intentional or conceptual capacities of consciousness, thereby rendering one’s conscious experience a ‘counter-experience’.

### III Viscosity

While he only gives three examples from the history of philosophy which prefigure his account of saturated phenomena (namely Descartes’ notion of infinity, Kant’s sublime, and Husserl’s internal consciousness of time), Marion (2002a: 219–20) suggests that the history of philosophy ‘has long known such saturated phenomena’ and that ‘no decisive thinker has omitted the description of one (or several) saturated phenomena, even at the price of contradicting his own metaphysical presuppositions’. Following this suggestion, perhaps something like a description of saturated phenomena could be found in the works of Sartre, undoubtedly one of Marion’s most significant predecessors in French phenomenology.<sup>7</sup> While there are certain resemblances between Marion’s expressed post-Heideggerian phenomenological analysis of the ‘invisible’ and the ‘unapparent’ with Sartre’s phenomenological account of absence and negation in *Being and Nothingness*,<sup>8</sup> arguably the closest structure to

Marion's saturated phenomenon in Sartre's phenomenological work is his analysis of a physical substance that is literally *saturated* with liquid: the figure of the viscous slime (*le visqueux*) which appears in the very last section in the final chapter of *Being and Nothingness*.

While Sartre's (2020: 798) explicitly gendered account of the viscous slime as 'a sickly sweet and feminine revenge' in *Being and Nothingness* is often interpreted as a sexist symbol of the feminine,<sup>9</sup> a number of Sartre's early English-speaking commentators have identified Sartre's figure of the viscous as (primarily) an ontological notion. For instance, Mary Warnock argues that Sartre sees the viscous as 'a symbol of the nature of the world in general' (Warnock, 1965: 100) or even 'a source of revelation of the nature of existence itself' (Warnock, 1969: xiii), while Iris Murdoch (1953: 21) writes that the viscous is for Sartre 'one of the fundamental keys or images in terms of which we understand our whole mode of being, and its sexual character is merely one of its possible determinations ... it serves as an image of our consciousness, of the very form of our appropriation of the world'. Although it is important to point out the problematic gendered and sexist overtones of Sartre's account of the viscous slime, it is in the phenomenological and ontological aspects of Sartre's analysis (as highlighted by Warnock and Murdoch) where we find Sartre's most striking parallels with Marion's account of saturated phenomena.

It is in the very same chapter where Sartre provides his most in-depth account of God as the 'in-itself-for-itself' in *Being and Nothingness* that Sartre (2020: 778, 783–92, 795) notably dedicates over ten pages to analysing the phenomenon of the viscous slime.<sup>10</sup> At the outset of his analysis, Sartre emphasizes that the human experience of the viscous slime as a repugnant yet attractive material substance is not a product or a projection of the specific perceiver's culture or upbringing but conditioned and caused by the very 'quality' of viscosity itself (pp. 783–4). In other words, the phenomenon of viscosity – the way in which the slime reveals or manifests itself – is not conditioned by the human subject but constituted by the nonhuman phenomenon of the slime itself. In fact, Sartre goes so far as to say that the viscous 'disclos[es] itself to us as the ontological expression of the world in its entirety' (p. 786) – that the slime discloses to us the structure of *all* phenomena – or perhaps, even the very structure of phenomenality per se. As Sartre further notes in his analysis, 'our apprehension of the viscous as such has created for the world's in-itself a particular way of *giving itself* [*créé une manière particulière de se donner pour l'en-soi du monde*]' (p. 786, translation modified, emphasis added).

For Sartre (2020: 787), the phenomenon of slime is particularly interesting for its 'character of a "substance between two states"'. While 'water is the symbol of consciousness' or the for-itself for Sartre (p. 790), the in-itself is 'represented by the pure solid' (p. 787). With its

semi-liquid semi-solid texture, the viscous slime represents a ‘possible fusion’ of the for-itself with in-itself (pp. 786–7) – not unlike the aforementioned ideal being of the ‘In-itself-For-itself’ which Sartre associates with ‘God’. Indeed, as Sartre notes, the viscous is nothing less than ‘a being that is the opposite of the “In-itself-For-itself”’ (p. 789). As Karsten Harries (2004: 31) summarizes this point:

Every human being, according to Sartre, seeks to lose himself as man in order to become God ... the ideal we vainly pursue. And just the recognition of such vanity, the recognition that to become God we would have to lose ourselves as man, strengthens the call of a counter-ideal that tempts us by beckoning us to give up vain dreams ... The counter-ideal, too, tempts us to lose ourselves as man, but not now to become God, but to allow ourselves to sink back into that chaotic life from which we emerged.

The viscous slime is precisely this ‘counter-ideal’; it is a ‘counter-God’ – ‘a being that is the opposite of the “In-itself-For-itself”’ (Sartre, 2020: 789), or even, as Harries (2004: 30) bluntly puts it, ‘a symbol of Sartre’s devil’.

While for Sartre the human desire to attain the ideal state of In-itself-For-itself is a dynamic which underlies all acts of human consciousness – in which the for-itself is intentionally conscious *of* some being in-itself, the usual dynamics of intentionality is unsettled and reversed in one’s experience – or perhaps even ‘*counter-experience*’ – of the ‘counter-ideal’ of viscosity.

At first, [the viscous] gives the impression of a being that can be *possessed* ... Only, just at the movement when I believe I possess it, by means of a curious reversal [*un curieux renversement*] I am possessed by it. This is where its essential characteristic makes its appearance. (Sartre, 2020: 788, original emphasis)

Whereas the for-itself is normally that which intentionally apprehends – or ‘possesses’ – the in-itself, in the case of a ‘counter-experience’ with viscosity, Sartre argues that ‘the viscous reverses the terms: suddenly the for-itself is *compromised*’ (p. 788, original emphasis). To rephrase this in transcendental terminology, whereas the intentional object is normally *constituted by* the intentional act of consciousness for-itself in common phenomenological experiences, the dynamics are reversed in the ‘curious’ experience of viscosity: the consciousness for-itself is no longer that which constitutes the phenomenon of viscosity; rather, consciousness becomes *constituted by* the viscous phenomenon – or as Sartre puts it: ‘it is the for-itself’s absorption by the in-itself, like ink by blotting paper’ (p. 790).<sup>11</sup>

As such, what we find in the ‘curious reversal’ which occurs in one’s encounter with the viscous phenomenon is an inversion of intentionality, where the usual dynamics between the apprehending intentional for-itself and the apprehended in-itself are reversed. The in-itself is now that which ‘apprehends’ consciousness – as Sartre (2020: 789) puts it: ‘The viscous is the in-itself’s revenge.’ Sartre’s viscous phenomenon not only upsets and reverses the common dynamics of intentionality, like Marion’s saturated phenomena, it moreover cannot be confined to the usual categorical frameworks or horizons of experience:

[T]he viscous, from my first intuitive contact with it, appears to me to be replete with obscure meanings and references beyond itself. The viscous discloses itself as being ‘much more than the viscous’; from the moment it appears it transcends every distinction between the psychological and the physical, between the brute existent and the meanings of the world. (Sartre, 2020: 792, translation modified)

Furthermore, remarking on a child’s first experience of encountering viscosity, Sartre continues:

What we say in relation to the viscous holds for all the objects which surround the child: the simple revelation of their matter extends his horizon to the extreme limits of being [*la simple révélation de leur matière étend son horizon jusqu’aux extrêmes limites de l’être*]. (p. 792, translation modified)

While Marion might take issue with Sartre’s terminology of ‘objects’ and ‘being’, as we see in the passage quoted here from *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that the (counter-)experience of the viscous slime stretches our phenomenological ‘horizon’ to its very limits or even the very limits of our comprehension of ‘being’.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, not unlike the way in which Marion’s saturated phenomenon exceeds all pre-determined horizons of experience and cognition, Sartre emphasizes that the viscous ‘discloses itself as being “much more than the viscous”’ (p. 792), as though the viscous is a phenomenon that is more than an object or even a being – something that is phenomenologically much ‘more than itself’ (cf. Marion, 2002b: 37).<sup>13</sup>

The viscous phenomenon which reveals itself as ‘much more than the viscous’ is not simply as an instance of phenomenological excess where the phenomenon of viscosity overwhelmingly exceeds any pre-conceived idea of ‘the viscous’ per se – that the experience of the *phenomenon* of the viscous is ‘much more than’ the *concept* of the viscous. Like Marion’s saturated phenomenon, Sartre’s viscous phenomenon is more notably something that exemplifies the character of phenomenality as pure givenness. As Warnock and Murdoch argue in their commentaries, Sartre’s

viscous may be understood as being ‘much more than the viscous’ in the sense that it represents ‘an objective structure of the world’ (Sartre, 2020: 792) – something obviously ‘much more than’ the viscous phenomenon itself. Indeed, there are a number of remarks in *Being and Nothingness* which confirm such a reading of Sartre’s account of the viscous: ‘the viscous appears already as a first draft of the world’s fusion with me’ (p. 785); ‘the world is, at present, being manifested by the viscous’ (p. 786); ‘as long as our contact with the viscous lasts, it is for us as if viscosity were the meaning of the entire world’ (p. 786).

Like how the saturated phenomenon is paradigmatic for phenomenality for Marion (2002a: 218, 227; 2010: 112), for Sartre the viscous phenomenon outlines the way in which ‘the world’ as such is manifested or indeed *given* to consciousness. As Warnock (1965: 100, 104) remarks in her commentary on Sartre:

The viscous is an important category for us to employ in our descriptions of the world just because it does, in itself, stand for our relation with things-in-themselves ... When I first meet with something viscous I am presented with a genuine pattern in things, something which will explain in general what the universe is like, what my place in it is, and what my aims are.

In this reading, the viscous represents how consciousness relates to ‘things-in-themselves’, or even, how ‘things-in-themselves’ reveal themselves to consciousness. The viscous is the symbolic figure of phenomenality which epitomizes the way in which the universe is disclosed to consciousness (Meyers, 2008: 91).

Compared to Descartes’ infinity, Kant’s sublime, or Husserl’s internal consciousness of time, which Marion lists as historical precedents of his account of saturated phenomena, Sartre’s analysis of the viscous presents an account of phenomenality in terms of self-giving (or even self-gifting) that more directly anticipates Marion’s account of givenness as the key characteristic of phenomenality. As Sartre writes (and emphasizes) at the outset of his analysis:

the viscous discloses [*révèle*] and develops its viscosity ... from the first appearance of anything viscous ... [viscosity is] already *a gift of itself* [*déjà don de soi*]. (Sartre, 2020: 785, emphasis in original)

Like Marion’s aforementioned emphasis that a phenomenon as that which shows itself inasmuch as it gives itself and the gift is an exemplary figure of phenomenality, Sartre’s account of the viscous phenomenon as one which ‘shows’ (*révèle*) itself to consciousness as ‘*a gift of itself*’ is nothing less than a notion of *pure givenness*. It is an exemplary figure of phenomenality – of the way in which the world is disclosed to

consciousness, a phenomenon which indeed shows itself inasmuch as it *gives itself*.

## Concluding Remarks

One of the ways in which phenomenology has contributed to contemporary social and cultural critique is through Levinas' notion of 'the Other', which has resourced many politico-ethical reflections from the theoretical questions concerning human identity to more concrete issues such as the refugee crisis. However, whereas Levinas' account of 'the Other' always pertains to a *human* other, recent cultural and social theory has increasingly turned its attention to *nonhuman* entities, such as animals, plants, inanimate objects, or even the environment per se. With his account of the 'counter-experiences' of saturated phenomena, Marion's 'more radical return to the things themselves' could be regarded as an expansion of Levinas' account of the inversion or reversal of intentionality in one's encounter with (the human face of) the Other to various saturated phenomena which may include nonhuman 'things' (cf. Gschwandtner, 2018: 456). However, by Marion's own definition of the saturated phenomenon, the perceiver who is overwhelmed by the excessive phenomenality of the saturated phenomenon she encounters can never be exactly sure whether what she has encountered is a human, nonhuman, or even *supernatural* phenomenon (see Marion, 2002a: esp. 202–6).<sup>14</sup>

This is partly the reason why Marion's account of saturated phenomena is often regarded as an attempt to make 'room for God to show Himself' within phenomenology (Welten, 2005: 206; cf. Janicaud, 2000), an accusation that can hardly be made against Sartre, the avowed atheist.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as opposed to Marion's saturated phenomenon – which Marion (2002a: 234–47; 2008: 1–17) notably argues finds its utmost expression in religious revelation, Sartre's viscous slime is unquestionably *not* a supernatural phenomenon: the viscous slime is for Sartre nothing more than an inanimate object that is without any latent conscious or 'supernatural' capacities.<sup>16</sup> But by reading Sartre's early work in relation to Marion's 'radical return' to 'things', we can see how Sartre's phenomenology is not merely focused on the structures of human subjectivity but also pays much attention to the ways in which inanimate objects such as the viscous slime can significantly impact and alter states of human consciousness like Marion's saturated phenomena, as if such entities have the capacity or even 'agency' to exert influence over intentional human subjects. In this regard, we can understand why Brian McNely (2019) argues that Sartre's phenomenology of 'nonhuman phenomena' has much to offer to the contemporary theoretical interest in human–nonhuman interaction in recent social and cultural theory.<sup>17</sup>

The analysis of the nonhuman phenomenon of the viscous slime in the final chapter of *Being and Nothingness* is, of course, not an account of God or the supernatural. What consciousness for-itself experiences in its encounter with the viscous phenomenon as the 'revenge' of the in-itself is emphatically *not* God's revelation or some supernatural phenomena. To the contrary, it is a manifestation of 'the opposite of the "In-itself-For-itself",' i.e. the opposite of God. The 'excess' experienced by consciousness is a phenomenological expression of the way in which the in-itself – the being of phenomena – transcends the finite grasp of the for-itself's consciousness: that there can never be an existent 'In-itself-For-itself' – there can never be a coincidence of being in-itself and consciousness for-itself. In other words, whereas religious phenomenologists like Marion (2002b: 158–62) may see saturated phenomena or counter-experiences of 'excess' as possible indications of the divine, in Sartre's avowed atheistic view such overwhelming experiences of phenomenal excess are nothing but reminders that the being of phenomena forever exceeds intentional consciousness – which for Sartre means that God does not and cannot exist (cf. Leung, 2021: esp. 41–2).<sup>18</sup>

What the foregoing comparative reading of Sartre and Marion shows is that one does not need to hold a quasi-theological outlook to arrive at the phenomenological insights on givenness or counter-experiences, that the 'turn' away from conscious intentionality towards phenomenality and excess that we find in Marion and other contemporary Christian phenomenologists does not necessarily imply an underlying hidden religious incentive: that the alleged 'theological turn' is not necessarily theologically motivated. Indeed, one may even say that Sartre offers a different – indeed explicitly atheistic – way for phenomenology to arrive at the observations central to its 'theological' turn to 'excess'. While Marion would most probably be displeased to see his notion of saturated phenomenon compared to Sartre's viscous slime or to see his phenomenology compared with what he sees as the 'vulgar atheism' of Sartre (Marion, 2012a: 244, note 19), re-reading Sartre's phenomenological works in light of Marion's not only highlights ways in which the latter's insights are motivated and informed by phenomenological reasons (or perhaps at times alternatively by his religious commitments). An engagement between Sartre's explicitly atheistic outlook with Marion's phenomenology which often appeals to religious and theological themes can moreover open up new conversations and fresh perspectives into understanding the developments and trajectories of the phenomenological tradition in its various strands, and indeed how traditional phenomenological analysis can contribute to contemporary social and cultural theory.<sup>19</sup>



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**Notes**

1. Unlike Husserl before him (and Sartre after him), Heidegger famously discards the traditional notion of transcendental consciousness. However, Marion (2008: 13; 1998: 70) argues that Husserl's (and Brentano's) emphasis on human consciousness as intentionality still very much underlies Heidegger's conception of human Dasein as Being-in-the-world.
2. Like Marion's (1998: 186–96) emphasis on the role of Heidegger's *Grundstimmung* of boredom in his 'second reduction', Sartre (2020: 6) argues that the phenomenon of being is reduced and disclosed to us through the feelings of boredom as well as nausea, which Sartre famously elaborates in his novel of the same title.
3. See Marion (1998: esp. 46–57), as well as Marion's explicit definition of 'phenomenality as the Being of the phenomenon' (p. 66), as opposed to 'the phenomenon of Being' (pp. 56, 167–9).
4. Cf. Sartre's (2020: 6–7) critique of the reduction of phenomena to objects, which may be attributed to Husserl or the 'first reduction'. However, despite the parallels with Marion's 'third reduction', Marion would probably object to Sartre's use of 'being' in his notion of 'the being of phenomena'.
5. However, many argue that the idea of 'inverted intentionality' could ultimately be traced back to Sartre's (2020: 355–66) analysis of 'the gaze' in *Being and Nothingness*. See Welten (2004: 89–90); Westphal (2006: 121, 133); Mackinlay (2010: 161–2, 168, 171–2, esp. 172): 'Marion acknowledges Levinas' contribution to a phenomenology of the other person, [but] his description of the other person's look in *Being Given* makes no mention of ethical injunction, and is more akin to Sartre's analysis than to that of Levinas.'
6. Marion argues that the recipient of saturated phenomena can no longer be called a transcendental *I* or subject but is better described as a receiver or what Marion (2008: 123, 125) calls *l'adonné* (translated as 'the gifted' or sometimes 'the devoted'), one who is 'given over to' (*adonné à*) a phenomenon. For Marion, *l'adonné* is the receiver of the given phenomenon whose identity and status are defined and given by none other than the phenomenon or indeed the phenomenality of givenness itself (Marion, 2002b: 43–53, 98–102, esp. 45; 2002a: 248–52, 262–71) – somewhat echoing Sartre's aforementioned 'purified' account of a consciousness that is only 'pure appearance' and 'no longer has anything of the subject'. In other words, it is not the conscious subject who constitutes the phenomenon but rather the given phenomenon which constitutes the identity of the conscious recipient.
7. However, Marion (2017: 14) claims that Sartre essentially had no influence on him: 'From the time of high school onward, Sartre no longer existed. He never played the least intellectual role for me.' Sartre is also notably absent in Marion's (1998) survey of the development of the phenomenological tradition.
8. One might also note that the famous café scene in *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre (2020: 41–2) depicts the absence of his friend Pierre with whom he had an appointment is precisely a phenomenological account of the

‘unapparent’ and the ‘invisible’, or even of that which is unforeseen and cannot be aimed at (cf. Leung, 2020: 478–80) – not unlike Marion’s (2002a: 19) saturated phenomena which ‘cannot be aimed at’.

9. See Collins and Pierce (1975). See also the critical responses to the ‘sexist’ charges against Sartre’s conception of the slime in Mui (1990); Burstow (1992).
10. Similarly, Warnock (1965: 99–107) remarkably dedicates nine pages of her 181-page book to discussing the viscous, where five pages (pp. 101–4) are used for simply quoting Sartre’s passage from *Being and Nothingness*.
11. To the extent that consciousness for-itself can become ‘absorbed’ by the viscous, Sartre (2020: 789) argues that one’s encounter of the viscous can be ‘the beginning of a continuity between the viscous substance and myself ... a flowing of myself into the viscous’. As such, there are certain structural parallels between Sartre’s (2020: 790) proposition that human perceivers ‘become viscous’ in an encounter with the viscous and Marion’s aforementioned account of consciousness becoming ‘the gifted’ (see note 6 above) in its experience of saturated phenomena: The status of consciousness in both Sartre’s and Marion’s cases is defined, constituted, and indeed given by the phenomenon.
12. Cf. McNely (2019: 207): ‘Sartre favors viscosity [for his analysis] because it signals a potential collapse of [all] ontologies.’ See also Sartre’s (2020: 791–2) earlier description in *Being and Nothingness* of how contact with the viscous ‘enriches’ consciousness with ‘an ontological scheme’ which transcends the commonly-assumed ‘distinction between the psychological and non-psychological’ to ‘interpret the meaning of being of all existents of a certain category, a category which, moreover, arises as an empty frame [*un cadre vide*] before the experience of the various types of the viscous.’
13. One may also note that there is an operation of radical phenomenological reduction to the ‘pure, encountered existence’ of the viscous in Sartre’s (2020: 785) phenomenological analysis of the ‘counter-experience of viscosity as one where the viscous phenomenon is fundamentally “reduced”’: making the viscous render all its meanings as something a priori and formal ... since it does not depend primarily on the way of being that belongs to the viscous, but only on its brute being-there, its pure, encountered existence.’
14. See note 18 below.
15. However, recent scholarship has also seen much discussion of Sartre’s relation to Christian theology (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 2018; Catalano, 2020; Leung, 2021; cf. Khawaja, 2016).
16. This is one important difference between Sartre’s analysis of the viscous slime and his different but not unrelated account of ‘the gaze’ of the Other – of another conscious human subject. See note 5 above.
17. Furthermore, unlike Marion who sees ontology and metaphysics as strictly incompatible with phenomenology, Sartre’s view on the continuity of phenomenological analysis and ontological inquiry is particularly suitable for a conversation with the recent social and cultural theoretical discussion of the ontological status of ‘things’ that are often speculative or even metaphysical in orientation.

18. Cf. Kearney (2001: 33): 'If the saturating phenomenon is really as bedazzling as Marion suggests, how can we tell the difference between the divine and its opposites?'
19. I would like to thank Amber Bowen and Deborah Casewell for their comments on an earlier version of this paper and the Templeton Religion Trust for their generous funding which made the research for this article possible.

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