Between Object and Event
The Iconic Object in Jean-Luc Marion

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Abstract This article proposes the concept of the iconic object as a phenomenological category capable of reconciling givenness and objectivity. Drawing on Jean-Luc Marion's distinction between idol and icon in his early theological works, and between object and event in his phenomenological writings, I argue that not every objectification is metaphysical. Beyond the *a priori* reduction that guarantees certainty by suppressing excess, there is a possible *a posteriori* objectification that recognizes its derivative character and preserves the distance that givenness requires. The iconic object designates precisely this mode of objectification: one that receives the given without exhausting it. The notion finds conceptual support in Marion's "iconic use of concepts" and in Pascal's doctrine of the three orders, which allows for the subordination rather than the abolition of metaphysics. Finally, the article explores how this framework can illuminate various fields such as medicine, education, and ecology.

Keywords event; givenness; hermeneutics; icon; Marion, Jean-Luc; objectification; Pascal, Blaise; phenomenology

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Forum Philosophicum 31 (2026) no. 1, 31–46 Subm. 18 December 2025 Acc. 30 December 2025
ISSN 1426-1898 e-ISSN 2353-7043 DOI: 10.35765/forphil.2026.3101.03

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion has been consistently guided by a critical tension between object and givenness. From his early theological writings on idol and icon, through his phenomenological analyses of saturated phenomena, to his more recent reflections on event, Marion has sought to liberate phenomenality from the hegemony of the metaphysical object. His most decisive move in this regard is the distinction between object and event: the object emerges through a *diminutio phenomenalitatis*—a reduction of intuition that guarantees certainty at the cost of excess, whereas the event saturates intuition and discloses givenness as irreducible to representation (Marion 2020, 194). Yet this framework raises a pressing difficulty: if the object is always the impoverished form of phenomenality, what place remains for the objective mediations of social life—institutions, law, technology, language—without which there is no human world?

Commentators have long noted that this difficulty is tied to a broader shift in Marion's thought. In his early works, the opposition between idol and icon functions as a theological criterion: the idol closes distance by folding the gaze back upon itself, whereas the icon preserves distance by opening the gaze to what cannot be represented (Marion 1995; 2001). In the phenomenological writings, this pair is reconfigured into modalities of saturation: the idol for the category of quality and the icon for that of modality (Marion 2002a; 2002b). This transformation gains in descriptive precision, but loses the critical dimension of the idol/icon opposition. The critical function returns, however, in the second typology of phenomena introduced in *Certitudes négatives*, where Marion (2020) distinguishes objects from events. However, some scholars, such as Christina Gschwandtner, have criticized this shift. In *Degrees of Givenness* (2014), she argues that the second typology forecloses the possibility of gradation: once phenomena are either object or event, impoverished or saturated, there is no room for the nuanced continuum of how things actually give themselves (Gschwandtner 2014, 42). Others stress what is gained. Emmanuel Rogozinski contends that the idol/icon distinction loses its critical force in the phenomenological writings (Marion 2015, 74), while Jorge Roggero (2019) argues that the second typology in fact recovers a critical dimension: by distinguishing object from event, Marion retrieves the capacity to expose when phenomenality is being suppressed.

This article seeks to move beyond this debate by asking whether the dichotomy itself can be nuanced. Not every objectification is metaphysical. One can distinguish between an *a priori* objectification, which imposes the conditions of the subject upon what is given, and an *a posteriori*

one, which operates knowingly as reduction, acknowledging its derivative status and preserving the distance that givenness requires. I call this second modality iconic objectification, and its correlate phenomenon the iconic object.

The notion of the iconic object finds conceptual support in two sources. First, in Marion's own account of the "iconic use of concepts" (Marion 1995, 32), where conceptuality becomes a mediation that signals its own inadequacy rather than enclosing the divine. Second, in Pascal's theory of the three orders, which shows how lower orders may be "doubled" and reoriented by higher ones without being abolished (Marion 2023). Taken together, these resources justify a category capable of reconciling givenness and objectivity without collapsing one into the other.

The aim of this article is thus both critical and constructive. Critically, it sharpens a tension in Marion's phenomenology—its tendency to expel social mediations to the side of the object—by showing that such exclusion is not required. Constructively, it introduces the category of the iconic object as a way of thinking how events can occur in the very midst of social practices. I will therefore first reconstruct Marion's treatment of idol/icon and object/event, before presenting the notion of the iconic object, grounding it phenomenologically, and finally suggesting its fruitfulness in the domains of health, education, and ecology.

Idol and Icon, Object and Event

Marion's early works articulate phenomenality through the polarity of idol and icon. In *God without Being*, he presents them not as superficial opposites—pagan art versus Christian art—but as antagonistic modes of being. The idol is that which suffices to be seen in order to be known: "The idol presents itself to man's gaze in order that representation, and hence knowledge, can seize hold of it" (Marion 1995, 9–10). The gaze makes the idol, not the other way around; it arrests, satisfies, and folds the gaze back upon itself like a mirror reflecting the human measure of the divine. The idol fascinates and dazzles by saturating visibility, allowing the divine to appear only at the scale of man. Historically, this logic carries over into the metaphysical concepts of God.

The icon, by contrast, does not result from a prior act of vision but provokes it. It is not an image of the visible, but of the invisible—from which the visible proceeds and toward which it leads. The icon preserves the invisible intact and manifests it precisely as invisible, exposing the human gaze to an infinite alterity. Unlike the idol, which reproduces a human model of the divine, the icon refers to an origin without original. In the icon, visible

and invisible grow together in a tension that Marion describes as distance: "that union increases in the measure of distinction, and reciprocally." (1995, 23) Whereas the idol divides the invisible—reducing one part to the visible while eclipsing the rest as unthinkable—the icon renders the invisible visible as such, saturating the relation.

This logic applies not only to images but also to concepts. When a concept seeks to comprehend the incomprehensible it becomes an idol; when it renounces domination and disposes itself to receive what exceeds its measure, it can function as an icon. Marion (1995, 23) says:

> Valid as icon is the concept or group of concepts that reinforces the distinction of the visible and the invisible as well as their union, hence that increases the one all the more that it highlights the other. Every pretension to absolute knowledge therefore belongs to the domain of the idol.

Theologically, the icon refers to the invisible face that culminates in Christ's filial self-giving that refers back to the Father. Thus, whereas the idol closes distance by returning the gaze to its own image, the icon opens and inhabits distance, allowing our gaze to be gazed upon by the invisible. As Marion puts it: if the idol is the invisible mirror of our gaze, the icon is the visible mirror of the invisible.

Marion (2004) revisits the relation between idol and icon from the horizon of aesthetics and art. He distinguishes two possible regimes of crossing between the visible and the invisible. The first—classical—one is where the invisible exerts itself upon the visible by means of perspective, under the logic of intentional objectivity. The second—less common—one is where the invisible acts directly upon the gaze, freeing it from the structure of spectatorship and even calling into question the status of the "I" who looks. Here Marion identifies the possibility of "the invisible *in* the visible." (Marion 2004, 20) Analyzing *White Square on White Background*, he describes it as a "non-objective phenomenon": "we must learn to see the canvas as the presence of a nonobject, which nevertheless shares the complete visibility of objects" (Marion 2004, 21). The icon belongs to this second regime: it is not produced but received; it does not fulfill the expectation of the viewer but educates the gaze to see differently. Within this logic, Marion opposes the icon to the idol. The idol fulfills the expectations of desire, even if in surprising ways; the icon, by contrast, exceeds every anticipation, "drives desire mad," and annuls foresight. The idol is an invisible mirror delimiting what the gaze can bear; the icon, by contrast, opens a horizon in which what is given belongs neither to artist nor spectator. The true painting—and here

Marion includes the icon—arises from its own necessity, produces itself, and requires of the painter a receptive passivity capable of letting forms impose themselves from an invisible ground.

Against the logic of the market, which reintegrates the artwork into the regime of objects, Marion proposes the icon as an alternative model of the image: not a pictorial genre but a doctrine of visibility. In the icon one passes from the dyad gaze–object to the triad gaze–object–prototype, and what is distinctive of the icon is that in it I know myself to be seen:

> Icon here designates a doctrine concerning the visibility of the image, more exactly, concerning the usage of this visibility. This doctrine is characterized, in summary, by two radical innovations.
>
> For the duo (or duel) of a spectator's gaze, objectively visible, it [the doctrine of the icon] substitutes a third: a spectator's gaze, objectively visible, but also a prototype. The prototype does not only play the role, at first here, finally very banal, of an original (mimetically reproduced by the objectively visible), of a referent (possibly inaccessible), or of a phantom from the nether world [l'arrière-monde]; it does not intervene as a second visible, behind the first, concealed by the first mimetic objectivity—uncontrollable, unusable, indefinitely repeatable; it intervenes as a second gaze that, as through the transpierced screen of the first visible (the painted or sculpted image, etc.), envisages the first visage, that of the gazing spectator. Before the profane image, I remain the viewer unseen by an image that is reduced to the rank of an object (the aesthetic object remains an object) constituted, at least in part, by my gaze. Before the icon, if I continue to look, I feel myself seen (I must feel myself thus in order for it to function effectively as an icon). Thus the image no longer creates a screen (or, as in the case of the idol, a mirror), since through it and under its features another gaze—invisible like all gazes—envisages me. (Marion 2004, 59)

This structure finds its extreme figure in the cross: a type that does not reproduce its prototype by resemblance, but designates it paradoxically, opening up an abyss between appearance and glory.

What is decisive at this first stage is that distance has a triadic character: it unfolds in the relation between the I who looks, the visible object, and the invisible prototype. The icon is never a mere image; it is a mediation that keeps open the gap between the painted face and the invisible face of Christ. The idol, by contrast, reduces this triad to a closed duality: the I and the object in mirror, without remainder. Marion thematizes this difference

as a critical stance against the metaphysics of presence: the idol fixes, the icon displaces. And it does so through distance, which functions as a hermeneutical criterion of discernment.

When Marion turns to phenomenology—particularly in *Being Given* and *In Excess*—the term distance ceases to occupy a central place and is frequently replaced by *écart* (gap). This terminological change, however, does not imply the disappearance of the motif, but its reconfiguration. *Écart* designates the irreducible difference between givenness and manifestation, between call and response, between what is given and what shows itself. Distance thus becomes a phenomenological principle: givenness cannot be reduced to full visibility, but always gives itself "in excess," beyond the intuition that receives it: "The givenness opens the gap between what shows itself and what is given. This gap—or perhaps this distance—can never and must never be annulled or forgotten. All that remains is to traverse it" (Marion 2016, 15–16; my translation).

It is important to emphasize that this reconfiguration also alters the status of the icon. In the phenomenology of saturated phenomena, the icon no longer functions in the triadic key of Marion's early writings (gaze–image–prototype), but is concentrated in the relation itself: the face of the other, which exerts a counter-intentionality upon the self, obliging it to become witness. Distance is no longer played out primarily in sensible visibility (image/prototype), but in the asymmetry of the intersubjective relation. The icon becomes the "irregardable": "there is no visible or assignable intuition," "there is nothing to see," "nobody has ever seen it" (Marion 2002a, 232–33). Similarly, in *In Excess*, the face does not manifest itself and never communicates its meaning:

> When it envisages me, it does not manifest itself. Or if it manifests itself—because in envisaging me, one can also say that it manifests itself from itself, starting from itself and insofar as itself, more than any other phenomenon manages to do so—it does not nevertheless ever say its meaning. (Marion 2002b, 121)

The idol, for its part, no longer designates the rival of the icon in the theological register, but a type of saturation. The initial critical opposition thereby loses force, and distance shifts registers: no longer a theological criterion of discernment, but a phenomenological structure of givenness.

The consequence is ambivalent. On the one hand, phenomenological rigor is gained: distance no longer depends on theological representation, but on the very structure of appearing. On the other hand, part of the critical

function that the idol/icon opposition carried in the early works is lost. The task is no longer to denounce idolatry as the closure of distance, but to describe the variety of ways in which givenness exceeds intuition. This explains Rogozinski's reading: in *Being Given*, the idol/icon distinction seems to dissolve, losing its critical edge (Marion 2015, 74). Yet, as Roggero (2019, 128) observes,

> Rogozinski is right to point out this modification in the status of the critical opposition between idol and icon. Nevertheless, it is not true that the critical dimension loses all relevance in the phenomenological works. The critique of the perspectival procedure of objectification—proper to the idol within the metaphysical regime—remains, albeit in a more attenuated form, as a critique of the limitations of the a priori conceptual framework in poor and common-law phenomena, and it is reinforced in the distinction between object and event introduced in *Certitudes négatives*.

At this level, the opposition reappears: between what closes distance and what keeps it open.

In the second topic pertaining to phenomena, Jean-Luc Marion establishes a decisive distinction between object and event. This opposition crystallizes what was already implicit in his earlier writings: the tension between objectivity and givenness, between reduction and eventiality. The object does not arise as one phenomenon among others, but as the result of an *a priori* reduction of the event. In Marion's (2020, 194) words, "its objectification is the result of a phenomenal restriction, and this *diminutio phenomenalitatis* assures it certainty only by masking, or even by almost suppressing in it its originary event-characteristic." The security offered by the object comes at the price of a loss: what shows itself is diminished in its original excess.

Thus, Marion can affirm that "the object constitutes the impoverished figure of phenomenality, impoverished because diminished in intuition, contrary to the event, which is a phenomenon saturated with intuition" (2020, 195). Object and event are not two types of beings, but two extreme modes of appearing: the object, reduced to what can be actively constituted by consciousness; the event, exceeding all anticipation and abandoning us to possibilities we could never have foreseen prior to its irruption. Hence Marion emphasizes that the object proceeds from vision, while the event precedes it: objectivity is founded on what I can already grasp, whereas the event surprises me from an unforeseen future and demands of me a response. Here we note the importance of the *a priori* character that object-constitution has for Marion: it consists in imposing objective conditions in advance, *a priori*.

In this sense, the opposition between object and event is inseparable from the question of predictability. The object presents itself as what is calculable, available, reproducible. The event, by contrast, occurs without guarantees, precipitating reality toward what had not yet occurred and can never be repeated identically. The essential point is that it exceeds me, does not allow itself to be reduced to mere representation, and retroactively redefines the very horizon of the thinkable. This opposition must also be considered in relation to the thing. For Marion, the object does not coincide with the thing: it replaces it. The thing resists reduction, shows itself from itself, whereas the object is a constituted double, alienated by a process of dematerialization aimed at securing certainty. The object no longer appears "in itself and by itself," but as a residue of intelligibility, relative to a power of knowing that renders it dependent upon consciousness. The thing, by contrast, resists, because in it an irreducible "yes" is affirmed (Marion 2016, 171–77).

At this point the following question becomes critical: must every phenomenon necessarily be constituted as an object? Is objecthood the exclusive horizon of what is given? Marion shows that tradition—from Kant to Husserl—has closed off this question, reducing even non-objective phenomena to an exteriority of theoretical reason. The object thus emerges as a hegemonic horizon, guaranteeing certainty at the cost of stifling the possibility that something might show itself from itself, outside the conditions of objectification. In contrast, the event discloses another temporality. Whereas the object is given in the stability of the present, the event precipitates toward the future, constantly arriving as that which had not already been given. Its constancy is not that of repetition, but of incessant change. The object shows little because it receives little; the event gives itself without ceasing and therefore never finishes showing itself. Hence, its intelligibility does not reside in immediate certainty but in the consequences it unfolds, in the retrospective hermeneutics it demands.

Marion (2016, 185) can therefore affirm: "the saturation of certain phenomena must be understood as the formal consequence of their phenomenality according to the measure of givenness." The event, as saturated phenomenon, reveals the insufficiency of objecthood and opens the possibility of thinking phenomenality beyond the object.

This distinction between object and event seems to reprise the antagonistic relation once borne by idol and icon. Now it is the object that conceals the distance between what is given and what appears, while the event acknowledges it and—in a certain sense—phenomenalizes it. As Roggero (2019) suggests, this allows a critical dimension to reemerge. It also opens

up an ethical dimension to the phenomenology of givenness, where what is at stake is the need for a hermeneutical discernment capable of deciding the most just way to phenomenalize what is given.[1]

Yet here a difficulty arises. The difference that Marion establishes between icon and object seems to foreclose the possibility of an iconic relation at the very heart of social life. The worker, the employee, the citizen—all seem condemned to objectification. The face of the other, once it enters a framework of economic or institutional exchange, ceases to be face and becomes object:

> All the same, when the other person finds him-or-herself identified by a professional or social role (technician, notary, doctor, teacher, judge, and so on), no doubt he or she benefits from a definition and I can assign to the other a meaning; I can even consider that the person's conduct and words express this meaning. But straightaway the other disappears as a face: I cease to envisage him or her as a face, because I have no need of it in order to behave toward the other; he or she does not, besides, expect this much, and asks only to be recognized according to function and profession, which is what I most certainly do. Our reciprocal inauthenticity assures social relations very well, which standardization and effectiveness require, which anonymity guarantees. (Marion 2002b, 121)

If we follow Marion at this point, there appear to be only two options: either the invisibility of the face, or the violence of a metaphysical objectification that reduces the other to a mere social role.

But is that the only alternative? Should we not think a form of objectification that is not necessarily metaphysical but derivative, secondary, even legitimate? In other words, is an *a posteriori* objectification possible which, far from suppressing givenness, begins from it and acknowledges it as its foundation? Perhaps the problem does not lie in objectification itself, but in the way it is conceived: either as an *a priori* condition that closes off all appearing, or as an *a posteriori* reduction that, while simplifying what is given, preserves the memory of what exceeds it. The problem, however, persists: is the object always condemned to annul distance? Is it not possible to think an objectification which, instead of erasing the excess, recognizes

1. Regarding the need for hermeneutical discernment in Marion's work, Tamsin Jones (2011) proposes to draw on Gregory of Nyssa's hermeneutical model in order to complement Marion's phenomenology. Steinbock (2007a), for his part, while rejecting the term hermeneutics in favor of discernment, appeals to the discernment of spirits from the Christian religious tradition as a possible framework. Roggero (2020), in turn, develops his criteria following Romano. I have addressed this question in my article *El discernimiento hermenéutico en Jean-Luc Marion.* (2022)

and safeguards it? If distance is the nerve of phenomenality, then it should not be the exclusive monopoly of the icon-event. This is the turning point: to think the possibility of an iconic object—that is, an objectification which maintains distance within itself rather than suppressing it.

THE ICONIC OBJECT

Up to this point, we have seen how distance operates in Marion's thought, both in his early theological phase and in his phenomenological turn. In both moments, however, a binary association seems to persist: on one side, the icon (or the event) as guarantor of distance; on the other, the idol (or the object) as its suppression. This symmetry provides critical clarity but risks becoming a rigid dichotomy that prevents us from thinking the complexity of social life. If accepted without qualification, this opposition implies that every form of objectification inevitably reduces the other to an object, closing off distance and cancelling the possibility of an iconic relation. Within such a framework, the worker, the patient, the student, and even the interlocutor in an institutional context would always appear under the sign of idolatry—condemned to be objects of function, exchange, or calculation. The only alternative would seem to be the exceptional encounter with the face: an event that breaks with the social order and exceeds it.

This reading leaves an unsettling void. If social life as such were essentially idolatrous, no space would remain for mediations capable of preserving distance, even under objective forms. Yet Marion himself provides the resources for overcoming this impasse. At the end of *Being Given*, in his discussion of abandonment, he acknowledges that social life necessarily involves objectifications—anonymity, interchangeability, efficiency of exchange. If every saturated phenomenon were to impose itself in its absolute excess, common existence would become impossible. Objectification, therefore, cannot simply be abolished; it is a necessary condition of everyday dwelling (Marion 2002a, 318–19).

The question, then, is not whether to objectify, but how and when:

> When confronted with this phenomenon, it is a question of seeing whether I can describe it as an object (a common-law phenomenon whose intuition is contained within the concept) or whether I must describe it as a saturated phenomenon (whose intuition exceeds the concept). (Marion 2008, 136)

The issue concerns the modality of objectification rather than its mere existence. Can there be a form of objectification that recognizes its derivative character, that knows itself as reduction and takes responsibility for

what it leaves out? In other words, can there be an *a posteriori* objectification—conscious of its own limitation, open to distance, and therefore non-metaphysical?[2]

This possibility leads to the introduction of the notion of the iconic object. Unlike the metaphysical object—closed, self-sufficient, and guaranteed by certainty and geometric order—the iconic object arises from the recognition that objectification does not exhaust givenness, but receives it under a limited form, conscious of the distance that constitutes it. It is an object that, instead of closing off excess, points toward it—that, instead of absorbing the gaze within its certainty, diverts it toward what overflows. What is decisive is that distance remains open. The iconic object does not replace the event, but neither does it annul it: it houses the event within social mediations, recognizing the limitation inherent in all objectification and avoiding the tyranny of the subject.

In this sense, the iconic object can be phenomenologically justified by analogy with the iconic use of the concept that Marion develops in *God without Being*. There, Marion (1995) distinguishes between a metaphysical concept—which seeks to enclose the divine within the logic of being—and an iconic concept, which recognizes its own limits and knows itself as mediation, opening itself to what exceeds it:

> as the idol can exercise its measure of the divine by concept, since the gaze as well can invisibly reflect its own aim and in it dismiss the *invisible,* the icon also can proceed conceptually, provided at least that the concept renounce comprehending the incomprehensible, to attempt to conceive it, hence also receive it, in its own excessiveness. (Marion 1995, 22–23)

In a similar way, the iconic object does not enclose what is given within the certainty of its objectification, but keeps open the distance toward the excess that constitutes it. The triadic character of the icon (gaze–visible–prototype) allows the object to be understood as a transparent mediation which, instead of absorbing the gaze, redirects it elsewhere. For this reason, objectification is legitimate insofar as it occurs *a posteriori*, acknowledging that the phenomenon itself authorizes and suggests the mode of its

2. Steinbock (2007b), rightly in my view, distinguishes between "poor phenomenon proper"—mathematical and logical phenomena that are given with a poverty of intuition—and "denigrated phenomenon," which result from the objectification of a saturated phenomenon. The question that guides my work is whether every objectification of a saturated phenomenon necessarily entails a "denigration," or whether it is possible to conceive of a modality of objectification that favors the phenomenon itself.

objectification—a mode that is partial, provisional, and derived. In this key, the practice of anamorphosis reveals that, at times, the place where the invisible shows itself most clearly is precisely the object, provided that it is understood in iconic terms—as a visible mirror of the invisible. In this sense, the iconic object realizes the possibility, opened up by Marion, of a mixed phenomenon: "the pure event (if there is one) and the pure object (if there is one) setting forth its two extreme poles, between which there extends the prism of all other phenomena, however degraded or mixed" (Marion 2020, 194).

PASCAL AND THE ICONIC OBJECT

The proposal of the iconic object finds a decisive ally in Pascal's schema of the three orders. This framework shows how there can be a legitimate, even necessary, use of the elements of a lower order in the service of a higher one—provided they are not absolutized or closed in upon themselves.

Marion (1999) treats this schema in detail in *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes*, where he employs it to show a path of internal overcoming of metaphysics within the history of philosophy. The key to this architectonic lies in the fact that each order is constituted through a transgression of the preceding one. It is neither a closed nor a continuous system: the radical heterogeneity between the orders precludes any attempt at univocal systematization. The first order corresponds to the sensible and material; the second, to reason and evidence—the domain of metaphysics; the third, to charity. Each order possesses its own internal logic, its own "greatnesses," and its own criteria of judgment. The transgression that opens each new order does not annul the previous one but relativizes it. Marion thus interprets *Pensées* §308 as a structure that allows one to surpass Cartesian metaphysics from within its own unfolding.

Each order, according to Marion (2008), functions as both a heuristic and a hermeneutical principle—heuristic, because it renders visible phenomena inaccessible to the lower orders; hermeneutical, because it reinterprets already known phenomena. Here the metaphor of the gaze becomes central: each order allows one to see with different eyes: "Charity no longer intervenes as the pious and superfluous auxiliary to the passion of love; it opens a distinct world by opening other eyes in man." (Marion 1999, 313) For this reason, although the orders are incommensurable, they are linked hierarchically: the higher judges the lower, but not vice versa. This hierarchy maintains continuity between orders without collapsing into homogeneity: "each order suffices unto itself—at least it appears to in its own eyes—governs the inferior, and dispenses with any superior" (Marion 1999, 315).

To clarify this structure, Marion (1981) turns to Descartes's theory of code. Descartes conceives of sensations as effects of intelligible figures encoded by nature. Between effect (sensation) and cause (figure) there intervenes a code, which Marion calls "(de-)figuration." In the *First Meditation*, Cartesian doubt introduces an over-code that disrupts the equivalence between perception and truth, but which is later neutralized by the divine guarantee of veracity. Marion proposes that in Pascal the over-code is the product not of a malign genius but of divine charity. The key difference lies in the fact that for Descartes evidence is insuperable, whereas Pascal introduces a different parameter, charity, which displaces evidence as the ultimate criterion. The distance between the second and third orders is sustained by the distance between their parameters: evidence or charity.

This displacement is not without consequence. When an order attempts to judge another according to its own criteria, tyranny ensues. Pascal defines tyranny as "the universal desire to dominate beyond one's order." (Pascal 2004, 18) In this sense, Pascal—and Marion with him—does not criticize metaphysics *per se*, but rather its pretension to dominate realms that transcend it. Charity may judge metaphysics, but not the reverse. This judgment of the third order over the lower ones appears in §694 of the *Pensées*, where Pascal acknowledges the formal validity of geometry and metaphysics but denounces their uselessness from the perspective of the higher order:

> Order. — I could well have taken this discourse in an order like this, to show the vanity of all sorts of conditions: to show the vanity of ordinary lives, and then the vanity of philosophical lives, skeptic or stoic. But the order would not have been kept. I know a bit about it, and how few people understand it. No human science can keep it. Saint Thomas did not keep it. Mathematics keeps it, but it is useless its depths. (Pascal 2004, 173)

The same applies to the metaphysical proofs of God's existence: they are true, yet ineffective. Vincent Carraud (1992, 380) summarizes this point: "Although correct, the metaphysical proofs are disqualified, null, and without value for the gaze of the third order—the only one that matters, that of charity."

The iconic object situates itself precisely within this logic. It does not deny objectification—proper to the order of minds and to conceptual rationality—but places it in the service of a greater openness. It is an *a posteriori* objectification in which the object is recognized as already given and yet reinterpreted within the horizon of excess. Following Carraud's (1992)

interpretation, Pascal himself shows how concepts belonging to the second order (the proofs of God's existence, the calculus of partition, infinity) can be used and subverted within the third order, becoming apologetic resources without being reduced to their metaphysical origin. Something analogous occurs with the iconic object: its objectification belongs, strictly speaking, to the second order, but when interpreted from the perspective of charity it ceases to be tyrannical and becomes hospitable to what surpasses it.

The category of distance helps to specify this movement. In Pascal, each order is separated from the others by an incommensurable distance: spirit cannot be founded on body, nor charity on spirit. The iconic object preserves this distance, for it does not confuse object with event. Iconic objectification does not erase distance, but turns it into the very site of givenness.

Thus Pascal provides a fundamental hermeneutical key: the iconic object does not represent a return to metaphysics, or a naïve concession to objectivism, but rather the possibility of using objectification as a resource within a broader horizon, without losing its subordinate character. The notion of "doubling" metaphysics becomes here the principle that phenomenologically justifies the legitimacy of the iconic object (Marion, 2023).

APPLICATIONS OF THE ICONIC OBJECT

I would like to highlight three domains in which I consider the use of the concept of the iconic object to be particularly fruitful.

(1) Health: the patient as iconic object. In medical practice, the patient often oscillates between two poles: being reduced to a mere biological object (the body as a machine to be repaired), or being exalted abstractly as pure subjectivity (the autonomous patient as sovereign decision-maker). The notion of the iconic object breaks this polarity. The patient's body can and must be objectified—through clinical tests, diagnoses, and protocols—but that objectification can remain open to an excess that surpasses it: the irreducible dignity of the suffering person, their biography, their vulnerability. Such an *a posteriori* objectification allows for a medicine that, without renouncing science, keeps alive a posture of hospitality toward the suffering of the other.

(2) Education: the student as iconic object. A similar tension arises in education. The student cannot be reduced to a "human resource" or a mere mind that accumulates information, but neither can they be left within the romantic void of a pure subjectivity without demands or structures. The student manifests as an iconic object insofar as pedagogical devices (content, evaluation, methods) function as necessary objectifications that remain open to an excess—the mystery of learning, creative freedom, and

the capacity for independent thought. The iconic object enables a pedagogy that integrates objectification and transcendence, technique and openness.

(3) Ecology: nature as iconic object. In ecology, the tension lies between a nature understood as an object of exploitation and a nature divinized, untouchable, inaccessible. The concept of the iconic object offers an alternative: nature is indeed objectifiable—measurable, transformable, usable—but always within a distance that leaves room for its excess: its mystery, its beauty, its given character. Iconic objectification thus prevents both extractivism and naïve sacralism, proposing instead a relation of care that recognizes nature as a gift that presents itself in the form of an object, but is never reducible to it.

Conclusion

The iconic object designates a phenomenological figure capable of reconciling givenness and objectivity without collapsing one into the other. It preserves the openness of distance within the very process of objectification, allowing the phenomenon to be received without being reduced. Whereas metaphysical objectification imposes *a priori* the conditions of the subject, the iconic object arises *a posteriori*, as a responsible reduction that knows itself as limited and derivative. In this way, it reconfigures the space between event and object, between excess and form, as a field of phenomenological discernment.

The notion thus allows us to think how givenness can inhabit the very structures of social life—medicine, education, ecology—without being exhausted by them. It also invites further development: each of these domains could be deepened, and others explored, such as politics, aesthetics, and digital culture, where the tension between event and object becomes newly urgent.

At a more reflexive level, Marion's own phenomenology can itself be understood as an iconic object. His conceptual apparatus—givenness, saturated phenomenon, *adonné*, distance—constitutes a form of objectification that does not close off the gift but keeps open the space of its excess. His philosophy, then, exemplifies what it describes: a conceptual construction that points beyond itself, a visible mirror of the invisible.

In this sense, the iconic object not only names a category within phenomenology but also functions as a method and a stance: it teaches us to see phenomena, institutions, and even concepts as mediations that, when rightly received, can reflect the excess of givenness without appropriating it. The task ahead is to continue exploring how such iconic objectifications might sustain the possibility of a world that remains open to the gift.

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