Interpreting Saturated Phenomena At The Gym: Jean-Luc Marion Meets The Modern Day Bodybuilder

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This paper attempts to engage the phenomenon of selfishness by meditating on the modern day bodybuilder in relation to Jean-Luc Marion’s conception of saturated phenomena, in particular how the phenomenon saturates as an idol or icon. Marion’s claim that the ego “does not fix itself to its flesh; it fixes itself to itself as flesh” is the guiding idea for my essay. I will argue that the ego changes from first taking up its flesh as general human embodiment to then intending the world as body-as-idol or body-as-icon when it relates back to itself. How a person physically modifies their body alters how their ego takes its flesh. The bodybuilder becomes saturated as an idol because he gives the world his body as an object of fascination—a distraction—hoarding the admiration of the look upon him from seeing a deeper human meaning within the body. In contrast to the idol, an iconic embodiment gives the body, understood as the necessary material for communicating the ego’s intentions to the world, as a kenotic outpouring of one’s self-energies and resources for the physical, financial, and emotional betterment of the Other.

A general outline for how the ego relates to its flesh should be given before adequately understanding how the bodybuilder becomes body-as-idol. The taking of flesh by the ego is the particular way that the ego “feels”, in an internal way, the unique physical dimensions of the body to which the ego works and operates within the world. For

Marion, the ego does not reside within the flesh as a separate immaterial essence, but rather “throws” itself onto flesh in order to “catch”, and thus mold, itself. Marion compares the ego’s taking of the flesh to the way cement takes its mold\(^2\). Like the ego before being bound to flesh, the cement – which was once malleable – takes its shape when dried into the mold. The finished product is constructed only by the cement, but is given shape by the mold’s structure. The ceramic, by passing through the process of heating and cooling, becomes itself. Likewise, the ego/body relation is not that of the ego fixing itself directly to the flesh, but rather uses the flesh as the mode for a self-relation – a self-identity – like the cement using the mold to form itself without staying affixed to the mold apparatus. “The ego”, Marion writes, “casts itself in flesh in order to fix, if not freeze, itself, and in this way take its first flesh”. Similarly, Kierkegaard once described the body as being an organ of the ego, making known the ego’s motivations and intentions to others\(^4\). Without the flesh the ego is faceless, but, conversely, without the ego motivating its flesh to action, the flesh remains an inert body, and thus non-individuated, to eventually culminate in a passive death.

This is the cost of the ego’s casting itself in its flesh: it limits the ego’s self-understanding to the physical condition of the body. The ego needs its flesh to know itself, but this self-knowledge changes in that it must pass through a body subject to aging, accidental occurrences, and the intentional modifications of – for example – tattooing, hair dying, and physical exercise. To illustrate, imagine a whirlpool spinning in a circular pool, completely uninterrupted by any obstacles. The water flows freely around the circle, beginning and ending with itself. If a child jumps into the water and stands in its path, the water pattern changes from being a constant flow to now breaking around the child before reforming around the child’s back. The flow is disrupted and thus changed. The size of the child determines to what extent the disruption occurs. Likewise, a drastic physical change will alter the ego greatly as it “filters through” the flesh to know itself. As the flesh changes, as the body is altered and the ego now retakes its flesh from the body’s new particularities, the ego becomes interrupted, modified, to either be enhanced or distorted in some new phenomenological way. As such, the very ego is transformed as a concrete, fleshly, phenomenon.

Imagine a man who lost his hands in a construction accident. His taking of flesh would differ after the accident because the ego can no longer relate to itself as a flesh with all appendages. It must change and adapt to “feel” how the flesh can intend the world differently, say in seeking alternative modes of manipulation. The ego could no longer understand itself as a driver of automobiles or as a potential customer of the local boxing gym. The very identity of the ego must shift because of the body’s suffering. This drastic example is necessary to make explicit the more subtle variations that occur to us daily (e.g. weight gain, puberty, hair loss, acne, the changing color of our teeth, etc.). Every individual whose body goes through any of these changes experiences a mirror like change to their ego. Each change is unique to each individual because of a myriad of contingencies that are unique to that person; no two people have lived the exact same circumstances throughout life, making it true that each person’s taking of flesh is different from every other. What may have once been a homogenous taking of flesh for each person at birth, now leads the ego of the self down various paths throughout life, to climax in adulthood as living as body-as-idol or body-as-icon\(^5\).

Jean-Luc Marion’s account of the idol and icon is made explicit in his analysis of the saturated phenomena. J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson suggest that Marion differs from Husserl’s initial phenomenological project in that while “Husserl establishes that the limits of givenness are exactly those of intuition, Marion thinks that givenness is more fundamental and thus also more worthy of setting any limits, if they are to be set?”. The freedom allowed to the phenomena’s givenness lets Marion probe deeply into the inadequacy of the subject’s ability to conceptualize the given in its totality. Knowledge is not denied, but the extent of that knowledge is seen as falling short. In his book, In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena, Marion defines the saturated phenomena as occurring when “the duality between intention (signification) and intuition (fulfillment) certainly remains”, when “intuition

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Kierkegaard, Soren. The Concept of Dread. Princeton University Press, 1957
\(^5\) These two possibilities are not black and white, but represent a gradation of intensity which everyone lives.
gives (itself) in exceeding what the concept can foresee of it and show”7. The structure of the concept fails to adequately contain the overwhelming experience of the phenomena. Like a drenched paper towel held dripping water over the sink, the phenomena completely fills the constitution of the concept and overflows the concept’s limitations. There exists an unavoidable lack between the reception of the phenomena and its givenness, leaving the excess to “run off”. The idol and icon are both saturated, but where the excess “runs to” is what makes them significant. The translators for In Excess contrast Marion’s idea of the idol to the icon as the idol being that which “fills the aim and mirrors the limits of the observer”, while the icon “shatters the aim and reverses intentionality”. By “hoard[ing] up all admiration” of the look, the idol inhibits its excess from “falling to the outside” of the given in the sense of awe, surprise, or wonder. Rather, the excess “bounces back” to the observer, returning “to the look its proper measure”, in proportion to the observer’s expectations8. The look sees in the idol what the look gives. Marion puts it as, “my idol defines what I can bear of phenomenality—the maximum of intuitive intensity that I can endure [of the visible]... without weakening into confusion or blindness”9. Notice how the viewer is not able to receive that which is unexpected. The idol’s excess is an excess of multiple transactions without qualitative change between the given and the receiver. Unlike the self-reflecting idol – whose excess remains within the frame of the look and returns back to its origin – the icon represents the freedom of the excess to go beyond the given. Acting as, what James K.A. Smith suggests, a “visible indicator of the invisible”, pointing the gaze beyond itself “to a transcendence which cannot be made present”10. The icon implies a greater sense of distance between itself and that which is present; it can point to eternity.

Let’s consider a phenomenological case study of a bodybuilder. How does the bodybuilder – defined here as someone who works out primarily for the sake of enhancing their physical appearance – exemplify the saturated phenomena of idol11? Instead of a look given to, say, a painting, we have an ego intending its desire to the body through its flesh. The bodybuilder’s ego, before his taking of flesh is successfully modified into body-as-bodybuilder, begins with an egotistic desire for admiration. The bodybuilder follows a secular version of asceticism but – instead of disciplining the body for the glory of the Divine – the body works to satisfy its ego. The discipline consists of countless hours at a local gym exercising, waking early in the morning to cook the day’s meals, with cognizance being paid to caloric intake, the amount of fat, carbohydrates, and protein to assure the proper amount of micronutrients for optimal growth, joining a community of like-minded bodybuilders to share tips and strategies for making the shoulder striations visible, and shopping around for the most effective diuretic to take before beach season. All of these activities consume the time and resources of body. Instead of the bodybuilder reaching his goal, however, he discovers that his efforts of creating a satisfactory physique to appease the vanity of the ego ultimately fail. This truth can be learned from conversing with this type of individual; no matter how great of shape they may be, the person always feels a lack of finality, a sense that their hard work is not adequately rewarded by their physique. The ego now has a problem. The failure of the body to contain the insatiable appetite of the ego causes the excess of the ego’s intentions to come out “the other end” of the flesh of body-as-bodybuilder, and revert back to the ego in the form of excessive self-consciousness and anxiety. In other words, the body becomes saturated by the ego’s given but the excess circles back to pound into the body, further weakening the body’s structure12. The drenched paper towel remains held under the faucet until it disintegrates.

This economy of anxiety begins to form the identity into an obsession about how to stem the fulfillment’s inevitable failure. The ego begins to lose an objective appreciation for the real life problems of, say, the increasing social and political apathy of younger generations, how to help the homeless man living in the woods around the

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
11 The qualifier primarily is important here. The focus of the present critique is for those who exercise to become physically impressive. Those who exercise primarily for the health benefits which exercise provides are excluded from this argument, however, if this type of individual were to be honest with themselves, they may admit that vanity contributes, at least a small degree, to their motivation.
12 The physiological effects of anxiety and worry on the body are stunning.
corner, or the proliferation of mass murders at grade-schools, choosing to focus instead on the lack of symmetry between the body’s right and left biceps. The concerns of the ego become a slave to the lack/perfection duality between the ego and its flesh. The body-as-idol becomes unbearable for the ego’s aim, so unbearable that the ego can only respond by “slip[ping] away, and this very evasion remains [the ego’s] only access to what crushes” it. Because the ego cannot leave its body and still be a living self, the evasion remains one of isolation from truly encountering the other. In describing one who has become so ingrained with this type of anxiety, Kierkegaard concludes that they are so glued to this affect that friendship fails to seem worthwhile. This anxiety, the unavoidable duality between intention/intuition for the ego/flesh relation, becomes constitutive of the self, as when Marion writes, “I am what I look at. What I admire judges me.”

While the ego’s passage through its flesh as body-as-idol changes the ego into a selfish mode of intending the world, becoming blinded by the call of the other, with its excess given to the body-as-idol becoming a hermeneutical circle of constitutive anxiety, the ego for the body-as-icon is changed differently. The ego does not pass through its flesh of body-as-icon completely of its own accord, but rather, as the ego begins its relation back to itself through flesh, it “pauses” long enough for the other to “pull it through” this flesh into becoming an iconic embodiment. The body-as-icon can only come to be because the other is first and foremost the icon par excellence, partnering with the ego to offer himself as a receptacle for the ego’s excess of altruistic intention. Marion discovers that the icon par excellence is the other person, who represents “phenomena that cannot be looked at, that escape all relation with thought in general.” He continues in stating that we cannot have a vision of the Face of the other, because they cannot be constituted “from a univocal meaning”. If anything can be seen of them, it “does not result from the constitution I would assign to them in the visible, but from the effect they produce on me.” This effect is produced on me because, since I cannot constitute the Face, and there must be some intentionality, “it will not be a question, in all cases, of mine on that of the other, but of his or hers on me.” The other person “decenters” my position of standing too close to the mirror of life, elbowing me out of the way so that other looks may take their turn.

In contrast to the increasing effort by the bodybuilder of modifying the individual parts of his body, the body-as-icon has a broader use for his body. He understands that an iconic use of his body engages all of the anatomical systems as once, maneuvering his body to help ease the call of those in need. The ego may respond to the child’s tears by raising the body’s hand to touch the cheek of child, now orphaned, bending the body’s knees to kneel beside the sufferer to better hug and comfort him. Or the ego may move the body in urgency to block traffic for the bloodied biker hit by the speeding car. Or by using the body’s eyes and ears to see a poorly clothed man and girl sitting in the restaurant booth, listening to the man explain to his daughter that she must order from the cheap side of the restaurant’s menu because otherwise he could not afford to feed himself. The body-as-icon would alert the waitress that the man’s bill will be paid by his and request that she, the waitress, nonchalantly explain to him that his lunch is free of charge. These examples of the body responding to the other “pulls” the ego through its body-as-icon to known itself and discover what has changed. The ego knows itself as having accrued a greater sense of concern for the welfare of the suffering and underprivileged, realizing the dire state of desperation that plagues the other. And the constitutive anxiety that characterizes the bodybuilder is a non-issue for the body-as-icon because he is moved by his ego to become a vessel for, rather than the focus of, his ego’s intentional aim.

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.