

Gift and Economy

Gift and Economy:
Ethics, Hospitality and the Market

Edited by

Eric R. Severson

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P U B L I S H I N G

Gift and Economy: Ethics, Hospitality and the Market,
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INTRODUCTION

ECONOMY, GIFT AND MYSTERY

ERIC R. SEVERSON

Jacques Derrida was once asked what he thought about the absurd ironies and parodies that play out in the American sit-com *Seinfeld*.¹ The interviewer wondered if perhaps there were parallels between Derrida's deconstructive method and the peculiar way that the characters in *Seinfeld* place as much value in the way they arrange their cupboards as they do in critical relationships or even belief in God. Derrida had little patience for the question, pointing out that "deconstruction, as I understand it, does not produce any sit-com." There is a seriousness to philosophy that Derrida made clear in both writing and interviews, an urgent sense that the questions of deconstruction are neither trivial nor arbitrary. Derrida's defensiveness is perhaps partly related to frequent accusations that his own philosophical methods are too playful, too evasive, too capricious. Derrida apparently never gave *Seinfeld* a chance, for better or worse, but we might imagine him greatly enjoying the episode "The Soup,"² which deals with the vagaries of a concept at the heart of Derrida's later philosophical work: the gift.

In this episode, Jerry Seinfeld receives the offer of a free gift, an extraordinarily expensive Armani suit. The giver is Kenny Bania, a cloying acquaintance who initially indicates that the suit is completely free. Jerry has an instinctive reluctance to accept the offer. He knows what Derrida has worked so very hard to teach us: there is often far more to a gift than meets the eye. Jerry's friends convince him to take the suit, but on delivery Bania asks him for a simple meal in exchange for the gift. The cost of a meal, he points out, is absurdly small compared to the price of the suit. Jerry knows this meal is trouble and that by accepting the suit he is placing himself in an inescapable debt. The remainder of the episode amplifies the way that debt is leveraged against the recipient of a so-called gift. When Jerry finally gets the annoying Bania into a restaurant to buy him the required meal, Bania orders soup. He points out that soup, clearly

not a full meal, could never count as compensation for such a fine set of clothing. The gift carries along with it debt, weight, pressure, oppression and even violence. Jerry solves the problem of this weighty gift by passing it along to someone else, an unsuspecting third party that receives the near-violent energy of Bania. *Seinfeld* plays out, at the level of irony and parody, the impossibility of a gift.

Is it possible to really give a gift? This may seem like a peripheral question for philosophy, which normally directs its attention to seemingly bigger questions. But I open with a gesture to Derrida, not because this volume is principally focused on his work, but because much debt is owed to him for demonstrating both the centrality and difficulty of this question. The ideas and dynamics of the gift move into philosophy from anthropology and sociology, but it is Derrida that insists this question belongs at the heart of philosophy. To encounter the later work of Jacques Derrida, and many of his conversational partners, is to stumble repeatedly over the idea and implications of the gift. None of the themes developed by Derrida in his later years rival the importance of this core problem. We have it by Derrida's testimony, introducing *Given Time*, that his later works "were all devoted ... to the question of the gift, ... whether it appeared in its own name, as was often the case, or by means of the indissociable motifs," such as the event, the promise, sacrifice, etc.³

This volume is interested, from start to finish, in the idea and implications of the gift. Is a gift possible? Is there a blessed economy? Must economics always operate in a sinister and exploitive fashion? What can be learned by the philosophical investigations related to this concept? For his part, Derrida demonstrates the powerful and corruptive forces of economy, which wreak havoc on every effort to give or receive a pure gift. In so doing, Derrida offers twin insights. On the one hand, we become soberingly aware of how quickly our efforts to give or receive become contaminated by debt and credit. On the other hand, Derrida knows that there is something about the event of the gift that cannot be entirely explained by the machinations of economy. In the giving of a gift something happens, if only unpredictably and rarely, that cannot be accounted by a calculus that tracks the exchange of money, property, goods, debt and power. And this excess that confounds the reduction of the gift to the dynamics of power and exchange is a source of deep interest and fascination for a wide range of philosophers, including the collection of scholars who have contributed to this book.

The chapters of this volume investigate these basic questions from a variety of angles and perspectives. This question, we suggest, is a foundational one for philosophical discourse. This introduction will focus

on the way ideas about the gift relate to Christianity and responsibility. The first division of the book will provide a variety of insights on the philosophical dynamics and implications of the gift. Essays in the second section focus on the issue of power and economics as they relate to the gift. The final section presents some intriguing and hopeful suggestions about future thinking on giving and exchange. As Richard Kearney suggests in Chapter Six, the question of the gift is a “truly fruitful question for philosophy and its boundary limit – theology.”

Mysterium Tremendum

Philosophy in the West owes more debt to Christian theology than it lets on. There are reasons for this, of course. Philosophy departments consider it important to demonstrate the independence of philosophy from any reliance on faith, God, theology and other instabilities. This endeavor is well justified; philosophy does theology a service when it explores the intersections and separations between faith and reason, between religious texts and the philosophical themes that inhabit them. The discipline of exploring the debt owed by philosophy to theology is easy to neglect, however, and the consequence of this omission is an unfortunate weakening of both theology and philosophy. This volume most certainly inhabits this region between philosophy and theology. Exploring the dynamics of the gift presses us against the limits of philosophy, into conversations with the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology and especially theology. This essay begins these investigations by exploring the theory of religion proposed by Czech philosopher Jan Patočka.⁴

In one of his many discussions of the gift, Derrida explores Patočka’s interpretation of human religious history. A phenomenologist and student of both Husserl and Heidegger, Patočka delivers a series of *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*.⁵ Patočka claims that in a pre-religious stage, which he calls the demonic or orgiastic, the height of the experience of the sacred results in the dissipation of responsibility, debt and separation.⁶ This era in the history of religions remains a temptation, a component assimilated into the practice of religion. Patočka writes specifically about Judeo/Christian spirituality, which he sees in stark distinction from religious practices that aim at rapturous, fervent, and mystical experiences. The orgiastic religious experience evaporates the difference and distance between the human and the divine. One can imagine that Patočka has in mind the movements and trances of a shaman, whose disappearance into the mystical is also a removal from the ordinary

plane of existence in which one is bound in responsibility to the other.⁷ Such experiences focus on mystery, awe, fear, rapture and release. In this state, one is supremely responsible, but only to the spirits, to the divine.

Shamanic, indigenous and ancient worship is more diverse than Patočka takes into account, but his principle aim goes beyond his theory of religious history. Patočka's goal is to identify the quiet forces that pull at Christianity and undermine Christian responsibility.⁸ Religion, as Patočka understands it, carries in its genes a memory of these shamanic origins, an imprint of the wild and primitive past that is always a temptation and a danger. This repressed impulse returns and disturbs later forms of religion, arising as religious enthusiasm and rapturous worship. For Patočka, this way of being religious is not just primitive but also dangerous, for it renders responsibility to neighbor a peripheral and potentially irrelevant component of religion.

In his interpretation of religious history, Patočka credits Plato with establishing a new way of being religious. Plato elevated reason above religious enthusiasm. Platonic metaphysics does not dismiss religion but forces religious belief to be disciplined and chastened at the hands of philosophy. From its origins, Greek philosophy does appear to have taken mythology and mystery as its principle opponent. Thales, whom Aristotle anoints as the first philosopher, aimed to explain natural phenomenon without reference to mythology.⁹ The mysterious movement of the moon and sun across the sky were, for countless generations, understood as the mysterious machinations of a spiritually charged realm beneath or beyond the observations of the senses. For Thales, and supposedly for the discipline of philosophy, mystery is to be overcome by reason. This does not mean, for Patočka, that religion is defeated or that philosophy is intrinsically atheistic. Rather, philosophy establishes a kind of "cult of Reason."¹⁰ Platonism and neo-Platonism do not defeat religion but collect and direct theology in consistent, reasonable and systematic directions. Religious beliefs should, if nothing else, be consistent with one another.

Patočka therefore pits the unreasonable enthusiasm and fervor of "demonic" spiritual practices against the more disciplined and chastened operations of philosophy. Responsibility, which Patočka considers paramount for both philosophy and theology, is caught in the tug-of-war between the orgiastic and the rational forms of religious expression. Responsibility is not absent from either manifestation of religion. In the orgiastic mode, one is responsible only to the divine, and in an infinite, mysterious, terrifying way. In the neo-Platonic phase, Patočka claims, responsibility is subordinated to rationality and "the objectivity of knowledge."¹¹ For this cult of Reason, responsibility is a byproduct of the

rational ideas of goodness and truth. This subordination of responsibility is for Patočka the defeat of the *mysterium tremendum* that was so critical in the orgiastic stage. Mystery is instead now only relative mystery; obligation is, above all, to be seen as reasonable.

Christianity, by Patočka's interpretation, awakens the repressed *mysterium tremendum* in human religious consciousness. In Christianity, he writes, "the soul is not a relation to an *object*, however elevated (such as the Platonic Good), but to a person who fixes it in his gaze while at the same time remaining beyond the reach of the gaze of that soul."¹² The Christian God is beyond the scope of the human gaze, and therefore Christian responsibility should resist being domesticated to human reason. Yet Christianity simultaneously binds the worshipper to the stranger, the orphan, the widow, the other person.

In Christianity, as Derrida puts it, the Good is "an experience of personal goodness."¹³ Christian theology proposes that the height of the Good is a gift, the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation. This gift is neither the product of religious enthusiasm nor rational deliberation. Goodness happens *to* the self, but it is not a performance or achievement of the self. The doctrine of original sin suggests an ancient and infinite guilt that requires rectification. Finite human beings are incapable of compensating for infinite guilt, and must instead receive justification as the miracle of a gift. The idea of *grace* therefore functions as the cornerstone for any Christian theology of forgiveness. The origin of this gift is God, who is also the origin of responsibility. In this way, responsibility is wrested away from the cult of reason and returned to the realm of secrecy and mystery, but not without first being radically transformed. Responsibility arises from a relation to a Christian God who takes on the face of a peasant from Nazareth, the incarnate Jesus. Jesus himself teaches that his sheep are the ones who attend to the needs of the "least of these."¹⁴ Responsibility to the Christian God exceeds the cult of rationality, but in the direction of the neighbor. Christian responsibility is unreasonably dedicated to the welfare of the stranger, the orphan, the widow.

Despite the fact that Christianity depends so critically on the idea of the gift, on grace, it remains haunted by its ancestry. Patočka's demonic and Neo-Platonic phases in religious history lay dormant, repressed, even when Christianity is expressed without any mention of these ancestors. Both the demonic and the Neo-Platonic stages in religious history are characterized by an economy of the possible. There is, in these stages, a spiritual economy that leads devotees into the religious mystery. Through either religious fervor or philosophical devotion, one can begin to bridge

the chasm between the finitude of humanity and the Good. The innovation of Patočka's Christian stage in religious history is an end to any discernable path of ascension. The impossible chasm of Christian debt is daunting, dizzying, overwhelming, and often cause for despair, as thinkers like Kierkegaard have spilled much ink to demonstrate.¹⁵ The harsh reality that salvation is not a possibility but only a gift feeds the temptation to revert to previous models of religion and salvation. Christians are therefore tempted to cheat, to revert, to appeal to the cults of enthusiasm or reason to bridge the gap of debt caused by sin. And these ways of cheating, perhaps best named idolatry, lure Christianity away from its most brilliant and central principle: grace, the great gift.

The Gift

The name Marcel Mauss appears frequently in this volume; his 1950 book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchanges in Archaic Societies* has proved to be an invaluable resource for philosophical investigations on the gift in the last 60 years. His work is primarily sociological, but he regularly presents material charged with philosophical and theological importance. Mauss traces hundreds of examples of gift giving in the ancient world, with a particular eye for the elusiveness of a genuine gift and the way giving and economy have an ancient and intricate relationship. One such example points to the Hausa people in the Sudan, who fear the danger of fever and illness during the corn harvest. Mauss reports that "the only way to avoid this fever is to make presents of this grain to the poor."¹⁶ This act of justice and responsibility, caring for needy children in particular, establishes and safeguards the gods and spirits. Here, and in countless other examples, we find that an economy of giving presses toward responsibility. The act of generosity and giving stimulates divine protection and providential blessings. The gift of protection obligates the recipient to reciprocate. Alms are necessary to ward off evil; without divine reciprocation, the deal is off.

Christianity appears to operate otherwise. Responsibility is not slackened, nor the call for alms or acts of compassion. Rather, these procure no necessary benefit. It is absolutely critical for Christian theology that the blessings of God are not compensation for alms or good deeds. Patočka suggests that this is the new evolution of religious mystery; Christianity embraces the ancient tradition of divine mystery, but does so without abandoning the exigency of responsibility. Christians are compelled to responsibility, but should abandon all hope that these acts necessarily produce favorable effects. The result often is the opposite;

Christian giving leads to suffering, to voluntary poverty and chosen crosses. Christian worship points toward martyrdom, if never as a goal. The gift of Christian responsibility expects no compensatory return. By this reading of grace, if we lose sight of the concept of the gift, we simultaneously drift toward prior forms of religion in which responsibility played either a peripheral or an economic role.

This theological concept, the Christian idea of the gift, is sufficiently distinct from Patočka's other religious phases to make the transition challenging. The new phase, marked by the remarkable idea of grace, is an unstable position, perhaps precisely because of its innovative challenge to the forms of religion known in the orgiastic and neo-Platonic stages. For Patočka, Christianity's great genius is constantly threatened and undermined by the temptation to revert patterns and habits that are only subsumed but never eliminated.

The concept of the gift is as intractable as it is indispensable. Moving away from Patočka and toward the concerns raised by Mauss, we must explore the relationship between the *idea* of a gift and its everyday life and appearance outside of the often-sanitized discourses of philosophy and theology. While the idea of a gift lies at the center of Christian theology, Mauss and Derrida have demonstrated the illusive nature of the gift. This volume explores exactly this space between the idea and implementation of the gift. If both Patočka and Mauss are right, we may discover that the gift is the most important and most elusive philosophical and theological concept of all. Economy, debt and exchange return repeatedly to complicate the appearance of genuine giving, of responsibility that is not aimed at compensation and return. This volume wagers that this question remains a powerful and poignant concern for philosophy and theology today.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

¹ Jacques Derrida and Marguerite Derrida, *Derrida*, DVD, directed by Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2002).

² *Seinfeld*, “The Soup,” season 6, episode 7, originally aired November 10, 1994.

³ Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), x.

⁴ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1.

⁵ Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim V. Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 189.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷ We may justifiably question the universality of such shamanic experiences. Upon close examination, shamanic religious practices share less common features than has often been supposed.

⁸ Patočka’s stated interest is a better understanding of European history. He suggests that the innovation of Christianity has made Europe possible.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk. 1, ch. 3, 983b20; also see G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), ch 2.

¹⁰ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 110; Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 24.

¹² Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 116; Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 25.

¹³ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 50.

¹⁴ Matthew 25.

¹⁵ See especially Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*.

¹⁶ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 17.

PART I:

ANATOMY OF A GIFT

CHAPTER ONE

PRESENTING OF THE GIFT AND THE ECONOMY OF EXCHANGE

SHARON R. HARVEY

In this paper, I use the secondary sources of John D. Caputo for delineating Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion's demarcation of thinking on the gift. With the interpretive lens of Caputo, certain themes emerge in prominence from his vantage point, which he uses to push the topic of the "gift" further. He traces duty and moderation as major hindrances to hospitality for the other and utilizes Aristotle and Kant's ethics to illustrate this. Caputo also interjects an earlier framework of his own thinking originating in his work on Heidegger and Meister Eckhart that influences the notion of ethics and economy. These earlier thoughts become part of the background for understanding Derrida and Marion's positions on the gift in the context of economic exchange.

The Gift and the Horizon of Economy Unreconciled

In regards to the "gift,"¹ Derrida and Marion both displace it from the horizon of economy, sharing a common persuasion: "We cannot explain, and we have no access to the gift, so long as we keep it within the horizon of economy."² For Marion, the gift is to be extracted from the horizon of economy, and "'reduced' to the horizon of 'givenness.'"³ Caputo writes:

Marion is trying to reduce the gift to the horizon of givenness in order to be 'fair' to certain phenomena by removing them from the horizon of causality, by letting them be as the given phenomena they are, without reducing them to objects for a subject, and without linking them up in a causal chain.⁴

According to Marion, the horizon of givenness implicates debt:

[W]e are indebted not to another donor but to *donation* itself, to the horizon of givenness by whose momentum giver and donee are carried along. By giving ourselves to giving, to the horizon of giving, we are carried by the life of *donation* to which we owe all.⁵

For Derrida, the presenting of a gift becomes its undoing; it is no longer a gift. The appearance or recognition of the gift, as such, implies debt. Whenever a gift is identified or defined, the cycle begins with the receiver returning the gift, reciprocity. When a gift is presented, it enters the horizon of economy:

As soon as there is an identifiable donor and an identifiable donee, as soon as there are intentional, conscious subjects who know what they are doing, and an identifiable object/gift, as soon as there is an identifiable transaction between subjects about an object, then the “gift-event” [...] which has just taken place is annulled and presents have been exchanged instead.⁶

The “gift” is not identical with a present, for a present remains in the economy of exchange.

Economy makes the gift impossible.⁷ Derrida wants to transcend the moral and social debit of the receiver and credit of the giver.⁸ Both self-gratification from giving a gift and gratitude from receiving a gift indicate a subject, and the cycle of economy implicated.⁹ If the phenomenality of the gift is located in the subject’s experience, the gift is “annulled,” according to Derrida, but that does not mean the gift is completely eliminated. Caputo warns us not to be distracted by the horizon of economy where idolatry takes place, for we might miss the true gift. Caputo writes: “The ‘true gift’ is as such always to come, and so has no truth in the sense of phenomenal manifestness or givenness, for it will always correspond to a desire.”¹⁰ “What is to come” is a theme found throughout much of Derrida’s work¹¹ including such ideas as justice, democracy, friendship, hospitality, and gift.¹²

The big difference between Derrida and Marion’s understandings of gift is the appearance of debt. For Derrida, “A gift is everything except (*sauf*) duty and debt.”¹³ Caputo writes: “For Derrida, a duty and obligation are inconsistent with the gift. If it is a gift, I am not obliged to do it; if it is an obligation, I am not making a gift.”¹⁴ But with Marion the gift does bring debt, but our indebtedness is not to the donor but to the horizon of givenness, or *donation*.

The Incompatibility of Duty and Gift: Derrida and Caputo

In a chapter of *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* called “The End of Ethics,” Caputo carries this problematic of duty and the gift further using the thought of both Aristotle and Kant. Caputo shows that gift and giving must go beyond what they have taught us. Regarding Aristotle, Caputo says that his notion of moderation through the doctrine of the mean as optimal over the vices of excess and deficiency, is outdated today. Ethics today calls for excess, not being limited with the notion of moderation. The concept of excess will maximize relationships and love.¹⁵

With regard to Kant, Caputo argues that his ethics do not go far enough, either. There is the need to get beyond duty. With Kant, according to Caputo, the notion of duty “blocks a *gift*. To ‘give’ someone what is their ‘due’ is to do my duty, and not truly to give a gift.”¹⁶ Rather than remain in the realm of duty, Caputo writes: “To give a gift is to do *more* than duty requires or self-interest permits. The whole idea of a gift is to go beyond what I have or must or ought to do [...] Hence, if ethics is concerned with duties then I am ‘against ethics.’”¹⁷

To act from duty is only a minimum. To give a gift is a maximum. Caputo wants to go past duty. Why not go the extra mile? Duties get in the way of our responsibility to respond.¹⁸ Responsibility ethics generally falls into one of two categories: response-ability *to* the other, or responsibility *for* our actions.¹⁹ Caputo endorses the first category with his alterity ethics, or ethics of the “other,” in order to deconstruct the notion of duty and introduce an ethics beyond duty: an ethics of excess, or “gift.”

For Caputo, “obligation happens.”²⁰ There is a “claim” which the other has on us: for instance, the eyes of a suffering other, or the face of the marginalized, singular, other. Caputo wants to get at the impulse or call of the other, “responsibility as a responsiveness to the call of the other,” and he compares this responsibility to the Judeo-Christian element in Kant’s second version of the categorical imperative. He states: “But the imperative can’t be categorical; it’s not purely rational and respect is not a feeling of pure reason.”²¹ Caputo is interested in an ethical element that precedes reason and tries to deconstruct Kant’s element regarding the metaphysical formulation of imperative to arrive at the phenomenological experience that enlivens it.

One is taken captive, so to speak, by the other, which is, in every case, a particular human. We do not know how it happens, or even seek to know why the call of the other overtakes us. The postmodern project does not base knowledge or even ethics upon a certain foundation. Gone are the days of grounding philosophy and ethics on rationality or metaphysics.²²

Rather, we do not know what is coming; the flux of life meets us around every corner unprepared for the next disaster. According to Caputo, exposure to the flux releases action; a transformation takes place that allows for the needed action. Our own inadequacies in the face of the flux, fosters compassion for the other. So we act, not out of principles or rules. The call of the other makes a claim on us and we act.²³ For alterity ethics, "...the needs of the flesh are all you need for obligation."²⁴

Caputo gives examples from marriage, school, and work to illustrate the notion of gift and giving that is beyond duty; of giving in excess. He praises marriages that go beyond the call of duty: "For a marriage requires what is not required; what it needs is for each to do for the other what neither needed to do, again and again."²⁵ He laments schools being bound by the contract and its duties, and invites teachers to be lavish: "So the gift on the part of the teachers is necessary; it is the little extras, the things that teachers do not have or need to do, that we really need and make a difference."²⁶ When the workplace is driven solely by laws and contracts, it is not enough. He writes:

When workers will not do anything they are not required to do, when they will not make an extra effort to do something well, when they will not spend an extra moment that is not mandated by the clock, then the work will not be done well and they will be miserable on the job.²⁷

The problem with Kant's notion of duty is that it is based on reason. Caputo does not need reason as grounding for an ethics. Principles and rules may actually limit how extravagantly we act.²⁸ Universality is far too sweeping an assumption for a code for action, and does not allow for the multiplicity and complexity of the human.

According to Caputo, for Derrida, the gift is like a rose – without why.²⁹ This is a reference to the poem "The Rose Is Without Why" by the German mystic, Angelus Silesius (1624-77)³⁰ that Caputo used in his earlier work regarding the relationship of Heidegger and Meister Eckhart: "The rose is without why; it blossoms because it blossoms; It thinks not upon itself, nor does it ask if anyone sees it."³¹ Caputo illustrates how the rose's task is to open up before the sun. The rose "is" through blooming. He writes:

The rose illustrates the same point which Eckhart makes when he says that the soul which lives without why is like life itself. Life is not desired *for* something other than itself but *because* it is life: life is without why; it lives because it lives.³²

In a reference to *Gelassenheit*,³³ Caputo says, “The soul which abandons itself to God does not consider how it will profit by its own actions, and so it is like the rose without why.”³⁴

A thinking that thinks without the why is key here for us in understanding Caputo and Derrida’s emphasis that the gift is without why. It “does not calculate the interests of the subject,”³⁵ but gives without thought of return. Unconditional, no-strings-attached love does not love another for what it can get from the other, or for personal gain. Caputo elaborates further on:

[T]he madness of giving...does not calculate the interests of the subject, and it is that madness that belongs to the essence (or non-essence) of what Derrida calls the gift. The giving happens not because the widow is trying to discharge her duty and to give herself a good name and a good conscience; and *not* because it gives her great pleasure to discharge of her overflow, to give herself a good time. She gives without why (*ohne warum*), as Meister Eckhart said, and this is what he meant by love; she gives because she gives, which means, because she has let go of her I, which is the principle of self-love, of calculating a return. (Some people love God, Meister Eckhart said, the way they love their cow: for its milk).³⁶

It is this “aneconomics” or mad economics that brings in a new world; one that goes further than duty, obligation, and moderation. Caputo explains:

From time to time, here and there, it happens that men and women respond, answer a call, spend themselves, using themselves up entirely for the Other. They spend years, maybe a lifetime, serving others, giving themselves up for the good of others.³⁷

“It is a kind of madness, a sort of *folie*,” he writes:

Fools spend their lives working to feed and house the poor, or teaching in crime-ridden schools, or protecting defenseless wildlife; they lead a celibate life serving the peasants in Central America, only to be dragged out of bed one night and shot to death by right-wing gangsters.³⁸

Perhaps it happens that we will honor some of them, write biographies of their service, or make films.³⁹ In any case:

[f]ools make a gift of themselves. They enter themselves into an economy without reserve, where to expect a repetition is madness. They make mad investments, which guarantee no yield, which even promise a loss. They enter their lives into the history of another madness, turn themselves into a

song in praise of another folly. Fools do what is unlikely, unreasonable, impossible, at least not very sensible.⁴⁰

The call of the other is sheer madness.⁴¹ The ethics of aneconomics: It is the kind of call that Abraham heard when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son.⁴² Caputo writes regarding Abraham: "If time is a circle [...] then the gift, if there is any, must belong to an eccentric time, an exorbitant, aneconomic moment in which the circle is torn up. It would take place in a moment of madness."⁴³ Aneconomic: an event where the other moves us beyond the ordinary categories of duty, obligation, or moderation.

The Pertinence of Gift and Duty: Marion and Givenness

Marion's aim is to "propose a more radical phenomenology which stretches phenomenology to the limits of its possibility, to that limit where a radical 'reduction' of the subject releases a seemingly impossible 'givenness' (French: *donation*, German: *Gegebenheit*)."⁴⁴ Whether Marion's project can even be subsumed under the auspices of phenomenology is disputed by Derrida, Janicaud and others.⁴⁵ Marion's so called "saturated phenomenon" is his effort to address the "experience of the impossible par excellence, [...] the thought we cannot think, conceive or contain, the givenness beyond concept, category, or intention, the infinite givenness of what cannot be an object and does not have to be, God without being, which is testified to in mystical theology."⁴⁶

So for Marion, the "saturated phenomenon" is what "saturates any subjective condition or precondition that would contain its overflow or pre-delineate its possibility."⁴⁷ Whereas, for Derrida:

the impossible is the stuff of a faith or a desire with which we *begin*, which sets us in motion. We have always to do with what is *always yet to be given*, a givenness to come, a givenness which is *never given*, whose givenness is structurally impossible of "being given."⁴⁸

The "gift" is thus viewed differently by Marion and Derrida. The gift for Marion "is an event of saturating givenness, an event of donative excess or of gifting which so catches up both giver and recipient in its dazzling dynamics that they are not to be regarded as the causal agents of the gift but rather as the scene of its impossible gifting or self-giving."⁴⁹ For Derrida, however, whenever the gift is exposed as gift or givenness, it is poisoned, and ends up annulling itself.⁵⁰

It boils down to whether the gift can be described, and, for Marion, it can be, which places it within the reach of phenomenology. Marion portrays three scenarios: a gift without a giver, a gift without a receiver, and a gift without anything given.⁵¹ He says: “It makes clear that the gift is governed by rules that are completely different from those that are applied to the object or to being.”⁵² An anonymous gift given, such as humanitarian aid, is an example of a “gift without a receiver.” Or giving to the poor (as seen in the Christian tradition) will in the end be giving to Christ, can indicate a “gift without a receiver,” implying a gift without a physically present receiver. A “gift without a giver” is portrayed by an inheritance, a scenario where the giver may have never even been known.⁵³ According to Marion, “The gift does not always imply that something is given [...] When we give time, when we give our life, when we give death, when we give our word... we give no *thing*.”⁵⁴

Derrida and Caputo both recognize duty as problematizing the gift and they capture instead a noncalculating mode that accompanies the notion of the gift. Derrida differs from Marion on the gift as it regards duty. Marion “inserts duty and obligation into the heart of the gift.”⁵⁵ The experience of donor and donee comes into play here, and an example given is the suitor who is obligated to give the ring to its lover.⁵⁶ The acceptance by the lover is based on the gift itself. “The donor is obliged by the ‘gifting’ of the gift itself to give [...] the donor does not precede the gift as its cause.”⁵⁷

For Marion, we are indebted to givenness itself, to the horizon of givenness. But, for Derrida, “If we have been loved and given gifts, we ought not to be plunged into a horizon of infinite insolvent debt,”⁵⁸ an obligation to givenness.

Conclusion

Is a “gift” truly possible, or is all giving bound by the economy of exchange? With this paper we have first distinguished that a present is always bound in the economy of exchange, but the impossibility of the gift is its very possibility, according to Derrida, *which is to come*. For him, the presenting of a gift keeps it in the economy of exchange. Furthermore, Marion’s horizon of givenness functions within the economy of exchange, according to Derrida, by virtue of retaining the notion of indebtedness. In like manner to Derrida, Caputo delimits duty and debt, and presents us with “gift” as the claim of the other that is not based on principles of reason. He also argues that a giver cannot expect a return, nor can they be caught up in givenness. Instead, the gift should be “without why” or noncalculative in terms of the subject. This is to avoid the domination and

hierarchical power that occurs as inequities and obligations are fostered by the gift. Hospitality to the other has to do with the claim the other has on us, apart from any determining subject.

Finally, Marion's saturated phenomena of the gift in "its dazzling gifting" is to be contrasted with Derrida's gift as "a gift only *without* (*sans*) gifting, givenness, and donation."⁵⁹ Caputo helps us to see that the gift may be possible outside of the horizon of economy, but it will be unreasonable, unnoticeable, and without the return of the same.

Notes

¹ See John D. Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), henceforth cited as PT, 173, where he gives credit to the original founder of "gift" and the literature upon which recent scholarship is due: "To Mauss's *The Gift*, the text first published in 1950 that has provided the context for a steady stream of French discourses on the gift ever since."

² *Ibid.*, 62.

³ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁷ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999, henceforth cited as GGP, 205.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹¹ According to Caputo, "What matters most of all for Derrida is what is *neither* present *nor* given, what is structurally *never* present or given, whose givenness or presence is always *to come*" (*Ibid.*, 199).

¹² *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁵ John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), henceforth cited as MRH, 184.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See Caputo, MRH, 74 where he indicates that "[t]he figure of the gift-giving virtue is transfigured into a figure of *responsibility*, of responding to the other, so that my responsibility is not mine but the other's, who provokes it in me, who elicits it from me."

¹⁹ For this distinction see William Schweiker, "Disputes and Trajectories in Responsibility Ethics," *Religious Studies Review* 27, no. 1, (2001): 18.

²⁰ John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), henceforth cited as AE, 7.

²¹ John D. Caputo, “A Final Word (Eight Famous Ones),” in *Modernity and Its Discontents*, eds. J. L. Marsh and M. Westphal (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 127.

²² The recent movement merging philosophy and religion through mystical theology and the gift “is this desire to *experience the impossible*, to go where we cannot go, as Angelus Silesius said, where the “method” prescribed by modernity prohibits; to cross these limits, to defy the border patrol, to think the unthinkable...to the aporia of the impossible, where the way of knowledge has been blocked, there corresponds the imperative of *doing* the truth [...] which is what deconstruction is all about” (GGP, 3).

²³ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 187.

²⁹ Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*, 213.

³⁰ The Silesian poem is an exception to the Leibnizian formula, “Nothing is without reason,” an objectifying and representing activity of humans that does not take place at all with other species. Humans are the only ones that require reasons. Heidegger quotes Angelus Silesius’ poem found in *The Cherubic Wanderer: Sensual description of the Four Final Things* from 1657. (See Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. R. Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), henceforth cited as PR, 36.) Heidegger maintains that the rose does not need to have reasons for itself, although there are reasons for the rose. The rose as a thing does not require grounds or reasons as humans do in their existence. However, the rose is not without a ground. The “because” in the Leibnizian fragment gives the basis on which the rose rests, and that foundation is the beingness of the rose, or its blooming (PR, 57). “Because” hinders and prevents the “why” from being analyzed. The “because” is the ground and is without “why” (PR, 127).

³¹ John D. Caputo, “The Rose Is Without Why: An Interpretation of the Later Heidegger,” *Philosophy Today* 15 (1971), henceforth cited as RW: 3.

³² John D. Caputo, “Meister Eckhart and the Later Heidegger: The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought,” *History of Philosophy* 13 (1975): 67.

³³ This is the notion of *Gelassenheit*, or “letting-be” which has important implications for the gift as it also departs from the economical model. While not the main emphasis of this paper, *Gelassenheit’s* applicability is varied in other settings. See my analysis in *Heidegger and Eco-Phenomenology: Gelassenheit as Practice* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Press, 2009) for practical aspects of *Gelassenheit*. And for the connection of holiness and *Gelassenheit* see also, “Reviving the Catholic Notion of *Gelassenheit* for Environmental Responsibility

within the Wesleyan Holiness Movement,” in *ViaMedia Philosophy: Holiness Unto Truth: Intersections between Wesleyan and Roman Catholic Voices*, ed. L. Bryan Williams (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009).

³⁴ Caputo, “The Rose Is Without Why,” 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 126.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴¹ Caputo also writes on the relationship of madness and forgiveness in *The Weakness of God*. He states: “unconditional forgiveness looks like madness” which he contrasts with Jewish and Christian forgiveness that require confession, remorse, restitution and resolve; repentance. He writes that forgiveness in the religious schema is “in exchange for full repentance.” (John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 211.) He parallels forgiveness and the gift on page 210: “Forgiveness reproduces perfectly the paradox of the gift [...] I give up what I *have* on the other. I release them, dismiss their debt, and let them go.”

⁴² John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 200.

⁴³ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 162.

⁴⁴ Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*, 5.

⁴⁵ For more on this, see Robyn Horner’s piece in Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart, *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 154, that discusses the aspects of the debate on theology and its relation to revelation, and more particularly, phenomenology and its relation to presenting.

⁴⁶ Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*, 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵³ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-9, bold added for emphasis.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EXCESS OF THE GIFT IN JEAN-LUC MARION

CHRISTINA M. GSCHWANDTNER

Jean-Luc Marion is well-known as a philosopher of the gift. He already attempted “a sketch of a phenomenological concept of the gift” in an early and widely read article under that title.¹ His main phenomenological work *Being Given* explores phenomenology as fundamentally about “givenness” and includes a major section on “The Gift” (Part II).² He has engaged in extensive debates with Jacques Derrida on the gift and economy, especially in the highly publicized debate of the conference “Religion and Postmodernism: God, the Gift, and Postmodernism.”³ In the English-speaking world, this debate (somewhat unfortunately) dominated the early secondary literature on Marion.⁴ Only slowly have other aspects of his work also been recognized. Yet, in his most recent book, *Certitudes négatives*, Marion returns to the question of the gift, indicating that this question continues to be important to his thought.⁵ As in *Being Given*, the gift here figures as a central phenomenological figure within the exposition of larger phenomenological claims. Does Marion here merely return to the earlier debate? Or is his thought marked by a significant development on this subject? In this paper I will explore Marion’s most recent writing on the gift, setting it in the context of his earlier work on the same subject and examine to what extent it constitutes a development or adjustment of that earlier work. I will also raise some questions in regard to this most recent exposition and by extension of Marion’s phenomenology of the saturated phenomenon more generally.

In *Being Given*, Marion treats the gift as an important example of his notion of givenness. He develops givenness as the central characteristic of the phenomenon. Phenomena do not simply appear, they “give” themselves.⁶

They can only be experienced truly, if they are allowed to give themselves in their full givenness without imposing conditions on them. All preconceived notions and conditions must be set aside (or “reduced”) so that the phenomenon can appear fully as it is given,⁷ leading him to posit, as the fundamental phenomenological principle, “as much reduction, so much givenness” or that what appears, shows itself inasmuch as it gives itself.⁸ Marion then proceeds to an analysis of the gift, using Derrida’s reflections on the gift as guideline, but attempting to refute them at the same time.⁹ This debate originated in Marcel Mauss’ important sociological study of gift-giving in various societies, in which he describes how the gift ultimately functions as an economic exchange.¹⁰ Derrida argued in response to this study, that phenomenologically a gift cannot appear on principle, as it would immediately enter into economy and annul itself. A true gift has to be gratuitous, freely given, and not involve any connotation of debt or return. Yet, any gift, however concealed or however liberally given, will by definition elicit at the very least gratitude, or the consciousness of having given and thus a kind of obligation. It will be no longer a gift. In *Being Given*, Marion tries to tackle this aporia of the gift (i.e. its automatic reduction to economic reciprocity or causality) by considering every pole of the gift exchange: that of the notion of giving, of the giver, of the recipient (translated somewhat awkwardly as the “givee”), and the gift-item or object itself.¹¹ He illustrates with various examples that each of these poles can be conceived to be set aside or bracketed in particular circumstances. For example, in the case of a donation or inheritance the giver is no longer present or does not know the recipient, in the case of ingratitude or rejection of the gift there is no real recipient although the gift may have been truly given, in the case of a ring or the promise of fidelity there is no real gift-object or the object itself is not the gift but only represents it. In this work Marion argues that we can indeed speak of a phenomenon of the gift and thus overcome its aporia if we regard it as reduced in this fashion. It escapes economic exchange (reciprocity) and metaphysical causality (the principle of sufficient reason) and shows itself in pure givenness and immanence (BG, 114-116). In the later part of the book he goes on to articulate the notion of the saturated phenomenon, which is an excessive givenness where the phenomenon presents too much to consciousness and thus cannot be held or contained (BG, 199ff.). Although he does not extensively apply this analysis to his earlier treatment of the gift,¹² it does seem that the gift constitutes or at least can constitute such a saturated phenomenon. This also becomes clear when one compares his analysis here with an earlier article entitled “The Gift of a Presence.” Although this is a heavily theological article, and

Marion does not yet employ the terminology of “saturated phenomenon,” his depiction of Christ’s absence in the resurrection and ascension narratives (the topic of the article) displays many of the paradoxical characteristics of the excess in the “gift of absence” and the bedazzling blindness which he will later associate with the saturated phenomenon.¹³

These earlier accounts of the gift have been repeatedly criticized. Several commentators worried that Marion’s notion of givenness hides an unseen giver, that all gifts are ultimately gifts of God given in grace. Derrida did not think they sufficiently answer his critique, but also suggested there was more agreement between his and Marion’s position than Marion acknowledged.¹⁴ John Caputo wrote against Marion’s account repeatedly, finding it still far too determined. All elements of the gift-exchange must be suspended simultaneously, setting only one aside is not sufficient. Caputo also stresses that the gift *remains* impossible, that there is no way around the aporia, siding with Derrida on this point.¹⁵ Others complained about the notion of indebtedness Marion retains in his analysis.¹⁶ Has Marion overcome these criticisms in his more recent work?

Certitudes négatives attempts to provide yet another new concept for the realm of phenomenology. Believing the notion of the saturated phenomenon now firmly established,¹⁷ Marion advances the idea of a “negative certainty” (or “certitude”). His fundamental argument in the work is that just as there are phenomena that cannot be reduced to a phenomenology of objectivity where intention exceeds intuition or is at least equal to it, so the knowledge of certainty, advocated by modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant, is insufficient to deal with such phenomena. But we do not remain simply in ignorance or silence, as Kant and Wittgenstein supposed.¹⁸ Rather, as Marion argues here, we can reach a certain kind of negative certainty, patterned on theological apophysis.¹⁹ In this “negative certainty,” we can know precisely that a certain phenomenon cannot be known by scientific certainty. Thus we can delineate its “unknowability” which is not simply ignorance but a positive contribution to knowledge, indeed a certain kind of knowledge. He draws on traditional distinctions between natural and human sciences (the arts), especially as this is explored by hermeneutics.²⁰ While science generally operates with notions of objectivity, and a correspondence theory of truth, such an investigation is inappropriate for the subjects of the human sciences, which are precisely not “objects” and cannot be known with any certainty. Marion illustrates this with the examination of the comprehension of particularly rich events, with knowledge of the (human) other, with knowledge of the self (one’s own identity and individuality),

with knowledge of God (as “the impossible” *par excellence*) and especially with the gift.

Two chapters focus in detail on the gift, although the notion of givenness pervades the whole book and to some extent provides the presupposition for the exploration of “negative certainties.” These apply precisely to phenomena which give themselves in a “counter-experience” and cannot be constituted by consciousness.²¹ But as in *Being Given*, the notion of the gift seems to make this particularly clear. In the first of the two chapters “The Unconditioned and the Force of the Gift” (chapter III), Marion takes up many of his earlier treatments, referring extensively to *Being Given* and even the early “Sketch” but revising them significantly. In the second of the two chapters “The Unconditioned and the Variations of the Gift” (chapter IV), he explores the phenomena of sacrifice and pardon (for-‘give’-ness)²² as illustrations of the gift. They are ultimately what make the gift appear in all its richness.

Marion begins his analysis in this work by reviewing the aporias of the gift already outlined in *Being Given* and with a brief summary of his earlier treatment, especially in regard to the suspension of one of the poles of the gift relation, in order to allow it to appear in its pure givenness. Yet, in this context he goes further. He recognizes that his earlier account is predominantly negative in method: it responds to the economic reduction of the gift to exchange by freeing it from its causal and reciprocal connections, but it does not allow the gift to appear from itself, one might say positively or authentically (CN, 161-62). As an example of a gift that appears from itself, immediately within the horizon of givenness instead of being torn from the horizon of exchange, Marion examines the notion of paternity. According to him the gift of life given by the father who is not directly involved with the child and who must always leave the child (both after conception and later on to provide for it) is a freely given gift where no economy or reciprocity is at stake (CN, 163-168). The child can also never return this gift to the Father. He concludes that “paternity hence deploys, in fact and by right, the entire phenomenality of a gift reduced to pure givenness” (CN, 168).²³ There is no reciprocity present in this phenomenon of the paternal gift.²⁴ It also challenges the metaphysical principles of self-identity and equality, thus showing the excess and possibilities present here. Marion affirms that this abandon of the gift outside exchange and reciprocity applies not merely to the idea of paternity but to all instances of freely given gifts (CN, 173). The gift is hence truly a saturated phenomenon in the way outlined in *Being Given* and *In Excess*. Yet Marion goes on to outline two requirements of a gift: one must decide to accept a gift and one must see what it is one accepts.

Both of these requirements further serve to imbalance the notions of final reason and self-sufficiency. The gift itself must accomplish its acceptance (CN, 178). This notion of the acceptability of the gift is a phenomenological necessity, not a moral one or a kind of seduction. The gift is phenomenalized when it shows itself as it gives itself, thus confirming the fundamental principle of phenomenology, as Marion has laid it out. This fully reduced gift fulfills the definition of the phenomenon par excellence: it shows itself from itself and gives rise to giver, recipient, and gift. The gift becomes “the paradigm of all [or any] phenomenality” (CN, 181). Marion concludes the chapter by arguing that this provides a way of combating contemporary nihilism and the absolute rationality of economic exchange. The gift gives itself in complete freedom, without any conditions whatsoever, and thus has its own reasons outside of the logic or rationality of contemporary society. The privileged example of the gift shows that, instead of conforming to established horizons, saturated phenomena give rise to their own horizons and introduce new events and visibility into the realm of phenomenality (CN, 185).²⁵ (This final affirmation corresponds to his analysis of art and the artist. See also note 35.)

In chapter IV, Marion explores the notion of sacrifice and pardon. They play a special role as “variations” of the gift and in allowing the gift to appear. How do they do so? Marion begins by rejecting the sacrifice, as destruction or annihilation, in the case of the terrorist which serves as a negative example to illustrate that sacrifice cannot be defined in these negative terms. Even a definition of renunciation (sacrificing for an “other”) is not sufficient, as it immediately returns to a kind of economic reciprocity which the analysis of the gift has already rejected. Sacrifice is “abandon without return” or conditions and thus faces similar aporias as the gift (CN, 195).

The sacrifice supposes henceforth a gift already given, which it is not a matter of destroying or of rejecting, nor even of transferring to another owner, but of sending back to the givenness from which it came forth and of which it must always carry the mark. The sacrifice returns the gift to the givenness from which it comes forth, by sending it back to the return itself which constitutes it originally. The sacrifice does not leave the gift, but lives in it totally: it maintains the gift in its status as given, in reproducing it in an abandonment. (CN, 203)

This is not a counter-gift or a reciprocal return, but recognition of the gift, a way of allowing its givenness to appear. Marion illustrates this notion of sacrifice with the biblical story of Abraham’s (almost) sacrifice of Isaac.²⁶ He argues that Isaac had been given to Abraham as a completely gratuitous gift (both Abraham and Sarah were too old to