

2. Is the gift purely a social matter, or is it also ontological?

In the case of the unilateral imperative to give freely and disinterestedly, this has been grounded ever since Kant in an absolute divine imperative, a command to be good more fundamental than the divine bringing about of being and the human modification of the same. Equally, the perennial adepts of gift-exchange—most of humanity hitherto—have understood this exchange not to be merely social or cultural at all, but to be an aspect of a cosmic ecology: a vast circulation encompassing natural beings, the gods, and the ancestors.

A circumstance still perhaps reflected in our language, in which we speak of “the given” to refer to the inertly factual, and yet with a language that paradoxically conveys the notion of a personal transfer. When theorists, in turn, have reflected in the twentieth century on this circumstance, one gets:

3. The debate about the given and the gift.

All of modern philosophy, analytic and continental, sought to evade metaphysics by confining itself to the given, beginning with the given and remaining with the given, whether as the logical and grammatical parameters of possible sense, or as the noetic processes within which we receive and actively constitute a meaningful world.

But nothing, it turned out, was given in this inert fashion. There was no inviolable empirical data uncontaminated by synthesis or interpretation or evaluation. To find anything uncontestedly given, one had rather to turn to our entire existential circumstance. Here “it is given” that we are beings able to reflect on the fact that there is being at all. Here our specific existence in time and space is also “given” to us. Finally, things are only “there” for us because they are able to appear to us in diverse and never exhaustive aspects, both across space and through time. Things arrive to us via spatial journeyings and temporal advents. This may be the crucial reason why we can speak of the factual as the “given”—in excess of ancestral habit. What is there arrives and is in this sense “donated”—we naturally greet the budding tree and the new dawn with grateful welcome.

But what can this mean? Here:

THE TRANSCENDALITY OF THE GIFT

A Summary

The gift, according to ancient Seneca and modern Mauss, is supposed to form the primary social bond. Here, especially for Mauss, generosity precedes contract. The latter may be necessary in order to protect, but it is not fundamental. Gift, rather, is what connects and unites.

And yet it has come to be that which we most disagree about, beginning with the question of:

1. Gift and contract.

Is gift always gift-exchange? In order to give, must one already be in a relationship, and if gift is socially fundamental, does that mean that gifts have always already been exchanged? But if gift in this way begins as a return gift and itself expects in return a counter-gift, then is not gift itself an exotic mode of contract? But can that be a true gift? Already Seneca asked whether there can be an aristocratic, pure, disinterested gift, given for the sake of giving. For this “proto-modern” Stoic perspective, gift has more to do with absolute duty than with social bonds, with absolute ethical respect for the other, rather than with practices sustaining a specific community.

And so one gets the contrast between the pure, disinterested, unilateral gift on the one hand and the idea that any gift is always involved in the complex reciprocity of gift-exchange on the other. But then it has come to be asked:

4. The analytic and the phenomenological approaches part company. For analysis, once the given has become a "myth" and this is fully admitted, only the inanity of practice in order to be practical remains ("pragmatism"). For phenomenology on the other hand, it may be that we can salvage the anti-metaphysics of remaining with the given by re-interpretating the given literally as gift.¹ But does that mean that one turns at first to the rising dawn? No, because the phenomenological presumption of confinement to the given is that one remains with what appears within the realm of the thinking subject. If what is given within this appearance is fundamentally a gift, then this cannot be guaranteed by the off-limits "transcendence" of thought-independent being, but only in terms of this subjective space itself, even if this be a space where the primary subjectivity is that of "the other."

Therefore, it must be this space as such and not what appears to it, that is a gift. The gift of the thinking subject to itself? But how could such self-reference be a gift, or indeed fully proven as given even to itself? Instead, the subject must be given to itself before itself by an other in a "history" always older than itself.² No representation of an ineluctable given is required here, since the other is registered by my inescapable ethical response to her needy demand—a response which first of all ensures that I am "there" at all.

But how can we know such an imperative without characterizing the suffering other? Otherwise her demands upon me might be the inhuman and monstrous demands of a will to power, and not those of a passively suffering subjectivity at all. Moreover, if this subject does not, as an ethical subject, "appear" to me (as Levinas insists) how can I characterize her except by projecting my own experience of what it is to exist, to feel, and to know onto the other. Is not the "given" Cartesian subject still secretly prior in this *schema* after all? But this sort of givenness is supposed to have lapsed, along with all the other mythical "givens."

Therefore the priority of the ethical does not clearly work, and one is left with the question:

5. Is the gift/given first enacted ethically, or first known about theoretically?

Instead of trying to save givenness as gift, could one not instead admit (now that the anti-metaphysical twentieth century is over) that one has always already speculatively ("metaphysically") transgressed the boundary between the immanently appearing and the excess of non-appearing in the real? If, as Marion says, the typical phenomenon is "saturated" in terms of an appearing that exceeds our full conceptual grasp, then does not this mean (beyond Marion) that we receive such an appearing also with the supplement of our poetic, constructive speculation concerning the hidden—else the non-appearing excess will be merely a sublime hyper-presence without character, neatly segmented from that which does definably appear? And an uncharacterizable hyper-presence might be menace as much as it is gift.

This consideration, of course, tends to return us to the issue of language and interpretation. But it also brings us back to the arriving dawn and the budding tree. For now it is possible that things as well as persons can be initially conceived as gifts. Already, Heidegger suggested that *es gibt* was the deeper name for being. So:

6. Can one substitute the gift for the given in ontological terms, instead of reading the given as the gift in phenomenological terms?

Yet to read being as time necessarily but tragically interrupted by presence³ is to ensure that the gift is still an impersonal given and, moreover, that it is perpetual mutual sacrifice (of Being to beings and vice-versa) rather than gift-exchange. In addition, to claim that this is a true phenomenological reduction is still, after all, to locate the gift in the supposedly given.

Is another strategy possible? Supposing that I am myself, really, ontologically a gift? Then one does not immediately need to invoke the other in order to grant oneself this status. If mind or spirit is more than an illusory epiphenomenon, then it cannot derive purely from matter, which is, at least as far as natural science is concerned, completely describable without invoking any such reality. Therefore it must be in consequence a mysterious and fundamental gift from the unknown, superfluous to the

1. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*; Derrida, *Given Time*; Blanchot, "Relation of the Third Kind"; Marion, *God Without Being*.

2. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*.

3. Heidegger, *On Being and Time*.

apparent needs of objective being as known to science.⁴ If I am myself a gift, then what lurks in me from before myself is more than the human, horizontal other. It is rather the trace of a vertical donor. And it seems appropriate that this donor, "God," who gives gifts to nothing, and so gives gifts to themselves in order to establish gifts, should create first of all a creature able reflexively to exist by giving this gift to herself in turn. Is this not what it means to think?⁵ Then gratitude for the gift of self spills later over into generosity towards the neighbour in imitation of that generosity that has first constituted us in being at all.

But if spirit is appropriately the first given, is it absolutely the first given? Is this not rather being in general, and does not this then allow that "I" am first co-given along with others? And what of the role after all of merely material things? Are they not also first given, with a contingency applying to the "whole" of material reality in a way that the restrictedly relative concerns of natural science can never in principle fathom? And do they not ensure that there can be between people a concrete shared community, rather than mere mutual sympathy and respect at a safe distance?

This raises:

7. The question of whether our approach to the gift should be primarily philosophical or else primarily ethnographical?

Or in other terms, can we define the gift most securely as an eidetic possibility (within phenomenology) or else as an ontological precondition of finite existence (Bruaire's metaphysics) or must we rather discover it from the complex actuality of historical practice? A phenomenology combined with an ontology of the gift⁶ might perhaps conclude that gift is interpersonal, that to give one must already be responding and must already be in a relation of exchange to the proposed recipient. Moreover, it might also conclude that a gift, if it is to be accounted a gift at all, must be an appropriate gift—therefore the complex business of combining thing with person ("finding the right gift") is essential and not dispensable. Such a perspective suggests that gift is always a moment within gift-exchange.

4. Bruaire, *L'Être et l'esprit*.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—the Chiasm."

But can there be an exchange that is not pure formal contract? That deconstructs our modern divisions between private freedom (of donation) and public duty (of binding prior word)? This would have to be in terms of timings and spacings judged equivalent, even though not measurable as such. Non-identical repetition. Asymmetrical reciprocity. Plus the appropriateness of the gift combined with a surprisingness that exceeds the "just what I have always wanted" which can derisively suggest that the recipient was about to obtain the article for herself in any case. The difficult question then of the appropriate surprise—which judged wrongly could even be a violent intrusion. And since the horizon invoked here depends upon the reality of objective value, the possibility arises that a real but difficult gift might be wrongly received as a curse.

One can see then, in abstract formal terms, the possibility of an exchange that still sustains gift. It would be less a circle than an ongoing, never foreclosed spiral.⁷ But to know if this apparent possibility can really be instantiated, one has to regard and judge historical actions—both on a micro and a macro scale. At this stage, historical ethnography becomes essential. But within ethnography as much as within philosophy, the question has been asked:

8. Is the gift unilateral or is it reciprocal?

Many anthropologists have seen in gift only disguised contract, and have assumed in effect the modern division between reciprocal contract and unilateral gift. Especially they have suggested that a gift is only a kind of loan secured by capitalized, ungiftable items (Wiener, Godelier). But could it be that the ungiftable and that which must be given are two halves of the same unmodern picture? Namely that, anciently, objects were not yet commodities, and so were seen as specific things with specific "reserved" characteristics liable to achieve specific but not quite predictable effects? Able, in fact, to move the human plot almost as much as persons do? In which case we have the issue:

9. Of the Spirit of the gift.

If the gift is also an actor and not simply an object, then the ungiftable belongs to the person it defines (his inalienable name or property, etc.), while its surrogates must return as themselves or return in some sort of

7. See Godbout and Caillé, *World of the Gift*.

equivalent mode, because they must always *remain him* in some sense. Gift-exchange is possible in part because of a certain belief in the animation of objects.⁸ But beyond this discussion one can ask:

10. Is the unilateral/reciprocal contrast absolute?

Perhaps both paradigms assume that a situation of equality between social parties is the norm. But is there not rather usually hierarchy? Or always at least temporary hierarchy in that one person talks—gives orders, reports, etc.—and is so superior for the moment, or else one person listens—and judges—and is so likewise thereby superior? The person who talks both gives in a one-way sense and creates the theme and space of a subsequent conversation. In a sense he (somewhat) unilaterally gives the space of future reciprocity. Thus unilaterality and reciprocity can operate simultaneously, yet at different levels of causality. Supremely, one could note, God unilaterally gives a creature whose whole existence must be response to him. It is indeed this interaction of two causal levels that helps to sustain the never-foreclosed spiral of gift-exchange.

But to speak of spoken sign as gift—what does this mean? If a gift is a signifying convention then is it at bottom a fiction? Is the impossibility of the pure gift according to Derrida (because we award ourselves economically even in telling ourselves that we have been generous) coterminous with the endless deferral of meaning by the sign, such that to speak is to endlessly project the arrival of meaning, while to act ethically is endlessly to strive towards a generosity that cannot be enacted? This implies however, as Derrida was aware, that postponement of meaning nonetheless remains “truer” than a foreclosed presence of truth, while equally the impossible gift remains “the good” in a way that economic and contractual self-assurance cannot be. So:

11. What is the co-implication between gift and fiction?

Is meaning just postponed? Or can it be in some measure anticipated? And if not, then is the gift basically a sign, a promise of special attention that can never be realized? But a sign has always a material vehicle, like the person speaking, the medium in which it is inscribed, the actions, place, and time that accompany it. This vehicle itself supplements the import of the sign, and not just the next sign to which it gives rise. This ensures

8. Godbout and Caillé, *World of the Gift*.

that *some* meaning is already realized. Is this meaning a suppression of indeterminacy, or does it of itself open up a specific but open horizon of meaning? If it does not, then the significance of the material for meaning seems to be suppressed by arbitrary *fiat*.

But a sign proffered by a material someone deploying a material vehicle is not just a sign, it is also a gift. Inversely, a material thing handed over must be also a sign in order to be a gift. So gift is the exact point of intersection between the real and the signifying. It thereby exceeds the contrast between history and fiction, just as, at the instance where we receive joyfully a gift, our lives have become saturated with meaning, like novels, as if we were truly living out a dream. Thus the instance of the gift is the instance of the closing of the gulf between the fictional and the desired on the one hand, and the real and the tedious on the other.

And yet this instance only reminds us that such closure is more fundamental than the rift, since, originally, no material thing appears to us before it has been interpreted as in some way significant; nor, on the other hand, can any signified meaning ever entirely float free of material actuality. Where this cultural presupposition is seen as itself a response to a prior gift (sign/reality) then one has “religion.” Where the latter is absent, then the unavoidable presupposition of original gift—the givenness of gift, both historically and ontologically, for human existence—is placed, with a constant effort, in ironic brackets. Then the gift is seen as only a fantasy in order to escape the givenness of an endless drift, rising up without generosity from a fundamental void. All then unravels: there can be really no gift, unilateral or reciprocal, but only the assertive gestures of power and their self-interested mutual contracting.

So finally:

12. Is the gift the echo of divine creation and of divine grace?

And otherwise, does it lose all reality?

It would seem from what I have already said that the answer to both questions must be “yes.” But then the possibility arises that we can construe Christianity as the attempt to erect a cosmopolis on the basis of a universal gift-exchange. The *ecclesia* is nothing other than this enterprise. We could say, following Mauss, that the gift is the social transcendental; that the social process as such is gift-exchange, but add to this that it includes also an exchange with the divine. As Marcel Hénaff has

argued, gift is older than sacrifice, because the latter only arises within pastoral economies that already see agriculture as an essentially human productive work which displaces hunting and gathering as an exchange with the sacred other. Sacrifice either expresses a sense of reserve about this secularization or else a new recognition that human power also is a divine gift: one could say that the Eucharist, where we give all and all returns to us without partition of an animal, is the perfect consummation of this sensibility.

However, localized gift-exchange was lacking in equity, in principles of just distribution, and in ability to meet contingent, individual needs. A money-based market compensates for these deficiencies. At the same time, Aristotelian notions of just distribution rely upon a continuing sense of the reciprocity of social roles and of the founding of society in friendship. In this way contract is still bent back within the bounds of reciprocity. Nor is it the case, as Hénaff argues, that gift-exchange was always basically a ritual function of mutual recognition, once explicitly foregrounded, now more obscure. He can only claim this by ignoring clear instances of a gift-exchange *economy* in the case of tribal societies without any central government, besides the more general case of the exchange of women and finally the case of the medieval feudal and ecclesiastical economies which are often better understood in terms of the exchange of gifts rather than those of contract.

In a sense, the Christian project searches for the "middle" between gift-exchange on the one hand, and distributive justice with market exchange on the other. Yet the latter are essential to ensure a true appropriateness of the gift, which is essential to the gift as such. A global gift-exchange, as inaugurated by Christianity, ceases to be one of fetishized items, but becomes one of all that is truly valuable from the perspective of love and universal harmony. This requires, of course, a continuous task of judgment and discernment as to what is valuable and when and where. But if Aristotle retained the context of reciprocity, Christianity stresses this still more by seeing justice as fulfilled in charity—an unlimited concern to fulfil the real potential of all, and of all in harmony with all.

In this way, one could say that gift-exchange as the social transcendental is like a natural anticipation in all human societies of the society of supernatural grace. Judaism, with the city and the state, moves away from the tribal, by embracing money and the written law. Yet unlike every

city and state Christianity cycles back to the primitive by seeing the gift and the oral as lying once more beyond commerce and writing. In this way it poses a counter-universal to the universality of the abstract. Gift-exchange happened primitively between familiar neighbors; then more commercial transactions of barter between adjacent tribes. Finally, as Seneca stressed, total strangers must once more open negotiations with gift-exchanges. But with cosmopolitan, de-fetishized gift-exchange, one might say, the neighborly and the remote mode of exchange collide or endlessly oscillate. To live in one world-city is to live all the time with neighbours who turn out to be strange and to meet strangers who turn out to be oddly familiar. All this is always mediated by variously judged gifts—of things, words, and gestures.

Christendom, therefore, the sphere of *ecclesia* as necessarily both personal and material, is the fulfilment of gift-exchange as the social transcendental which is also a metaphysical and theological transcendental: indeed nothing less than the Holy Spirit as gift, or the bond of reciprocal loving union between Father and Son.

However, this means also that the true metahistory is at once the history of the gift and the history of the Church. And here there are two massive problems. First of all, if gift-exchange is the social transcendental, how today do we live in denial of this by splitting gift-exchange between private unilateral gift on the one hand, and ungenerous, purely self-interested contract on the other? Secondly, how has Christianity been complicit in this formation of a kind of anti-society?

To take the second question first. Transcendental gift-exchange was theologically undone. From the late Middle Ages onwards, theologians started to set divine and human activity over against each other. This meant that they could no longer see that all of human activity derived from God, such that to receive all from God is also to return all to God sacrificially in a gesture of active gratitude. Grace and merit were not earlier in competition with each other, and charitable exchanges between the living and the living, and the living and the dead, could be seen as contributing to the salvific process. But now the divine act of grace was seen as more emphatically unilateral. With the Reformers this starts to mean that it is less an act of divine friendship than one of arbitrary election, in the face of which gratitude is in a sense irrelevant. A meritorious response is then of no salvific merit and so the salvific economy gets entirely

divorced from the material one. There can no longer be any symbolic, ritual good works establishing mutual bonds of human friendship; only one-way deeds of charity which demonstrate an individual's state of grace. In imitation of divine absolute arbitrary sovereignty, human rule starts to get construed in terms of formal entitlement rather than intrinsic justice, while the market is handed over entirely to contractual calculation, free of any reciprocal obligations. Following the diverse work of Hénaff and Robert Brenner, it is now possible to re-work the Weber and Tawney theses: in England alone, the reduction of the peasantry to the status of wage-laborers, and the massive boost given to agrarian capitalism by both the dissolution of the monasteries (whose property was quickly transferred from the crown to the gentry, as Hilaire Belloc pointed out⁹) and the rise of a Calvinist theology of grace and commerce allowed a fully-fledged capitalism to emerge in contingent circumstances that render capitalism itself a contingent accident of Western history.

Hence the loss of transcendental gift-exchange is the result of a heterodox Christian development. This answers the second question. As to the first—how, if gift-exchange is transcendental, do we manage today to live in an “impossible” society?—one has to re-affirm that society and the network of reciprocal friendship are coterminous. Society is the “society of friends,” as the Quakers appropriately call the Church. (Even if they fail to understand what this really involves.) Yet it is possible to have a simulacrum of this such as we have to day. The simulacrum unites us all only by bonds of contract which seek to make one egoistic desire match with another—without friendship, generosity, or concern for the whole social organism. But this requires ever more draconian state policing in order that contractual freedom be not abused—for nothing in this system *can* ever explain to the individual why he or she should not abuse it. Indeed it rather suggests that it *ought* to be abused, if the individual can get away with it. In this way, the system tends to increasing delirium: increasing innovation for the sake of it; increasing attempts by individuals or groups to gain arbitrary power over each other and at the same time increasing attempts to counteract anarchy with iron discipline. Deviant forms of Christianity themselves underwrite this ride to an earthly Tartarus.

However, no rational argument can ensure that the simulacrum is a contradictory reality that must one day unravel. We cannot declare

9. Belloc, *Servile State*.

any theoretical limit to delirium nor to the downward spiral of pointless lateral macro and micro expansion. Instead, the transcendental norm of universal gift-exchange can only be recognized by a combination of moral commonsense and Christian faith. For only love can desire that there *should be* unlimited association in the true sense: a society of unlimited reciprocity, a society of friends.