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## Grateful Gifts: Toward an Ethic of Donativity

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**GRATEFUL GIFTS:  
TOWARD AN ETHIC OF DONATIVITY**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies

by  
Clayton James Monck Alsup  
B.A., Salisbury University, 2008  
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TO  
Hobbes

AND  
my sister, Dana, who has been wonderful and supportive company  
throughout the first twenty-three years of my life, and who never fails  
to keep me organized when I need the assistance

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Much recent work on the philosophical import of gifts comes in the wake of Jacques Derrida's work *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, in which he claims that the gift is aporetic. This essay is an attempt to work out whether the gift is genuinely aporetic and, if it is not, to explore what this means for the gift. In the first chapter I will give an account of Derrida's aporia as he presents it in *Given Time*. This will carefully lay out his reasons for thinking that the gift is im-possible, introduce the models of desire and duty, and explain why the presence of the ego is what is most problematic for the gift in Derrida's account. The second chapter will explore the moral philosophies of two thinkers, Immanuel Kant and Emmanuel Levinas, in order to better understand why the models of desire and duty are insufficient for thinking through the gift. In particular, I will give a criticism of Kant's theory of moral emotions in order to demonstrate that, although he claims duty is the sole source of the good, he seems to recognize that such a philosophy ignores another source of the good that finds its origin in the other. Levinas has such a notion of the other, but my analysis will show that he is just as incapable of thinking through the gift as Kant, as his moral philosophy revolves around a kind of radical, particular duty. The third chapter will explore what the insights of the previous chapter reveal about the nature of the gift. By the end of this new account of the gift, Derrida's aporia will be shown to have been correct but misguided, as the gift event works differently than he originally supposed. Finally, the fourth chapter will examine the ontological implications for the world if we are shot through with an otherness. This exploration will be done in conjunction with an account of Marion's phenomenology and Heidegger's essay "On the Essence of Truth."

## INTRODUCTION

The gift has been the subject of an increasing amount of philosophical discourse as of late. Much of this has come in the wake of Jacques Derrida's study of the gift, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*. In this study Derrida lays out the aporia of the gift, noting that its conditions of possibility are so stringent and radical that they are at the same time its conditions of impossibility. His attempt to think the gift as something freely given has since been taken up by several philosophers.<sup>1</sup> Adriaan Peperzak notes that "recently, giving has attracted the philosophical attention of authors who, neither Hebrew nor Christian, but secular, "Greek," and enlightened, are puzzled by the unselfish aspects that giving and gifts seem to characterize."<sup>2</sup>

Much of this recent literature has been primarily ethical in nature. The issues are to do with how we can give gifts; if giving gifts can be a duty; if our own self-interest gets in the way of giving gifts. Other works on the gift, however, emphasize a more ontological line of questioning. While this is not absent in the Derridean analysis of the gift (which, after all, is dealing with conditions of possibility), it is taken up by Jean-Luc Marion to try to think about the very structure of existence. This ties it to a lineage of thought on givenness that can be found in both Heidegger and Husserl. This essay is an attempt to bridge these two "genres" of the gift, the ethical and the ontological. It also is an attempt to show that Derrida's presentation of the aporia of the gift, while useful for understanding how gifts will need to be understood, does not match up with our own experiences of how we give gifts.

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<sup>1</sup> Consider *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, edited by Alan D. Schrift (London: Routledge, 1997) and *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice*, edited by Edith Wyschogrod, Jean-Joseph Goux, and Eric Boynton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, "Giving," in *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice*, edited by Edith Wyschogrod, Jean-Joseph Goux, and Eric Boynton, 161.

In the first chapter I will give an account of Derrida's aporia as he presents it in *Given Time*. This will carefully lay out his reasons for thinking that the gift is im-possible, introduce the models of desire and duty, and explain why the presence of the ego is what is most problematic for the gift in Derrida's account.

The second chapter will explore the moral philosophies of two thinkers, Immanuel Kant and Emmanuel Levinas, in order to better understand why the models of desire and duty are insufficient for thinking through the gift. In particular, I will give a criticism of Kant's theory of moral emotions in order to demonstrate that, although he claims duty is the sole source of the good, he seems to recognize that such a philosophy ignores another source of the good that finds its origin in the other. Levinas has such a notion of the other, but my analysis will show that he is just as incapable of thinking through the gift as Kant, as his moral philosophy revolves around a kind of radical, particular duty. In the analysis of Kant I will show that gifts must be both *for* the other and *from* the other. The analysis of Levinas will demonstrate that there is an aspect of otherness in our very selves, thus cracking open any notion of a self-grounded ego to the other. These insights will prove to be the key for thinking through the gift.

The third chapter will explore what these two insights reveal about the nature of the gift. In particular, because they both serve to shift the locus of the gift event from the ego to the other, they make possible a new conception of the gift event. This new conception allows for the ego to remain present and aware of the gift while not trapping it within economies of desire or duty. By the end of this new account of the gift, Derrida's aporia will be shown to have been correct but misguided, as the gift event works differently than he originally supposed.



Finally, the fourth chapter will examine the ontological implications for the world if we are shot through with an otherness. Phenomena as a whole have the capacity to be understood as gifts, as does existence itself, and whether this is an appropriate understanding will be examined. This exploration will be done in conjunction with an account of Marion's phenomenology and Heidegger's essay "On the Essence of Truth."

## CHAPTER 1: DERRIDA'S APORIA

### 1.1 The Im-possibility of the Gift

In *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, Derrida attempts to lay out the aporetic structure of what he calls “the gift event.”<sup>3</sup> He defines the gift in contrast to the structure of economy in general. “What is economy?...economy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, the hearth, the fire indoors). *Nomos* does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*nemein*)...As soon as there is law, there is partition: as soon as there is *nomy*, there is economy.”<sup>4</sup> So economy functions as the legal apparatus that designates what is owed to whom, establishing obligations in order to partition. In particular, it establishes obligations that relate to the distribution and partitioning of property.

The gift, Derrida goes on to explain, must be related to economy. In particular, insofar as a gift is property, it must then bear some relation to the economic. “But,” Derrida argues, “is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return?”<sup>5</sup> Derrida defines the gift as that which is opposed to economic obligations, which is given with no eye to what will be partitioned in return. It is asymmetric because it involves a loss that does not incur a debt on the benefactor, and so does not open up a circle of reciprocal obligations: “if the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 7.

This definition of the gift as aneconomic is not foreign to the ordinary understanding of the gift. This ordinary understanding of gifts is that they are voluntary, unearned, and free.<sup>7</sup> While gift events are surely more complex than this description makes them sound, any attempt to describe or define what a gift is must keep these qualities in mind. We are quick to recognize that a gift given in order to curry favor, or to glorify the giver, or with the intent of bribing the recipient, is not a gift at all. The focus of the gift is supposed to be not the donor but the donee. When a corporation gives money to a charity and then reminds us of this fact in countless advertisements, we doubt its sincerity. Donors that turn the gift event around to focus on themselves seem not to have given a gift. Just as a gift is given so freely that no debt is incurred on the part of the donee, a genuine gift is not intended to accrue credit on the part of the donor. It is contrary to the definition of a gift to demand repayment for it. Whatever we may discover a gift to be in this study, it cannot be given with the intent of being reimbursed or netting a profit, and Derrida would seem to be in agreement.

Yet it is precisely the understanding of the gift as aneconomic, so inoffensive to the ordinary understanding of the gift, that Derrida proclaims makes the gift aporetic, the impossible: “Not impossible, but *the* impossible. The very figure of the impossible.”<sup>8</sup> By “the impossible,” Derrida does not mean to say that the gift cannot happen. He does not intend for impossibility to be understood as the opposite of the possibility. Rather, he means to emphasize the *im*-possible, it is outside of possibility, it is not the possible. As François Raffoul elucidates:

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<sup>7</sup> “A gift...is something of value given to one unearned and undeserved by another agent at some cost to that agent and for the benefit of the recipient.” Paul F. Camenish, “Gift and Gratitude in Ethics,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 7.

The impossible would no longer be the opposite of the possible but, on the contrary, would be what “haunts the possible,” what truly “enables” or possibilizes the possible. The impossible, Derrida would claim, is possible, not in the sense that it would become possible, but in a more radical sense in which the impossible, *as impossible*, is possible.<sup>9</sup>

Derrida is interested in examining the way in which certain possibilities fall outside our horizon of what is possible, exceeding possibility and so being im-possible.

Derrida’s notion of the im-possible is linked with his notion of event, which is unsurprising as he has already clarified that the gift occurs as an event, the gift event. An event, for Derrida,

is what comes and, in coming, comes to surprise me, to surprise and to suspend comprehension: the event is first of all *that which* I do not comprehend and first of all *that* I do not comprehend...Although the experience of an event...calls for a movement of appropriation...there is no event worthy of its name except insofar as this appropriation *falters* at some border or frontier.<sup>10</sup>

The event, therefore, is im-possible insofar as it exceeds my comprehension; it is a rupture of my horizon of possibilities, and so is im-possible. With this understanding of the im-possible, we can see that Derrida does not mean to say that the gift does not occur; rather, he means that the gift in some sense must rupture our horizontal possibilities and so will seem to our thinking to be literally impossible.<sup>11</sup>

Derrida’s account of the gift thus far makes clear that the horizon that is ruptured by the gift must be the circular horizon of economy. The event of the gift is the aneconomic, a break

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<sup>9</sup> François Raffoul, “Derrida and the Ethics of the Im-possible,” *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008), 273.

<sup>10</sup> Giovanni Borradori, *Philosophy In a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 90.

<sup>11</sup> “...the impossible [is] what must remain (in a nonnegative fashion) foreign to the order of my possibilities, to the order of the ‘I can,’ ipseity, the theoretical, the descriptive, the constative, and the formative...It is a question here, as with the coming of any event worthy of this name, of an unforeseeable coming of the other, of a heteronomy...” Jacques Derrida, *Rogues* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 84.

away from the cycle of loss, obligation, and repayment: “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt.”<sup>12</sup> The subtle hints of an ordinary economy at work beneath the veneer of a gift can be discerned with a closer look, one that reveals even commonly accepted gifts as possibly problematic. Consider the example given by John Caputo of a birthday present: “a gift does not belong to the circle of presents... You can never get a gift on your birthday or Christmas.”<sup>13</sup> The presents we receive on our birthdays or on Christmas are surprises only because we do not know what awaits us beneath the gift wrap, not because we are surprised that they are being presented to us. If a mother neglects to give her son a birthday present, the son’s only surprise will be the *absence* of the present. To Caputo, a present is nothing but an expectation fulfilled, a remuneration delivered dutifully. Why this is so is related to the expected nature of scheduled presents; how can such a preconceived occurrence truly have the ruptural structure that Derrida ascribes to the gift?

Looked at economically it is easy to see why Caputo might portray the gift event of a birthday present in such a way as to sound little different from an employee’s payday. The employee does work, accruing credit with his employer; at the end of the pay period the employer pays off the debt, the employee receiving his just desert of payment for his labor. Caputo tries to bring out how the gift event of a birthday present shares the same structure: the parent has gone into debt for the child by giving over a present, transferring that debt to the child. The child then pays back his debt, normally through an expression of gratitude.

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 162.

Perhaps this is the case for ritualized presents, but one might insist that not all gifts share this structure. It would seem that gifts are given all the time without thought to the schedule of presents analyzed by Caputo. What about an unexpected gift? Here Derrida radicalizes his analysis of the impossibility of the gift event:

For there to be a gift, *it is necessary* that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt...It is thus necessary, at the limit, that he not *recognize* the gift as gift. If he recognizes it *as* gift...this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place...of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent...The symbolic opens and constitutes the order of exchange and of debt, the law or the order of circulation in which the gift gets annulled. It suffices therefore for the other to *perceive the gift*...in order for this simple *recognition* of the gift *as* gift, *as such*, to annul the gift as gift even before *recognition* becomes *gratitude*.<sup>14</sup>

The donee, therefore, is forbidden from recognizing that a gift is a gift at all. The issue is not merely that the donee might pay back the donor with an expression of gratitude, but that the donee will necessarily give the gift some sort of symbolic import if he recognizes it as a gift. This import is a recirculation of the gift, a recognition of the gift given in return, trapping the donee and donor in the same economy from which the gift was attempting to free them.

Nor is it merely the donee's recognition of the gift that sabotages the gift event:

The one who gives it must not see it or know it either; otherwise he begins, at the threshold, as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself back with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give.<sup>15</sup>

This is a familiar phenomenon. In giving someone a gift, we feel good about it; how can we be sure that we are not merely giving the "gift" as a means to deriving the pleasure of doing so? A

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, 13-4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 14.

husband buys his wife flowers and gives them as though they are a gift, but can we be sure that he is pure in his motives? While even he himself may intend to buy the flowers only in order to give them freely to his wife, the tiny voice of self-congratulation cannot be headed off. However much he might try to ignore or downplay it, the husband will, the moment he even intends to give the gift, be aware of his wife as indebted to him, leaving the relationship unbalanced. And because the logic of debt has already entered into this act, the balance is brought about through the symbolic self-payment in which the husband praises himself for his own generosity.

Now we see why Derrida insists that the gift is aporetic. Insofar as the gift is defined in contrast with objects of economic reciprocity, it must appear without any connection to the cycle of imbursement and reimbursement. Hence, even spontaneous gifts will remain entirely within the economic circle. Yet this condition makes the gift's ground of possibility also the ground of its impossibility, for we have just seen that the gift is always reinscribed into the economic circle from the very moment that it is even cognized.<sup>16</sup> The fact that cognition is sufficient to sabotage the gift is crucial; for Derrida, the symbolic representation involved in rationality inherently annuls the gift when it is thought, for it drags the gift back within the framework of symbolic economy. If the gift is to be given, it must be given in a moment of prodigal madness, in which neither donor nor donee recognizes the gift as such.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Robert Bernasconi, "What Goes Around Comes Around: Derrida and Levinas on the Economy of the Gift and the Gift of Genealogy," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, edited by Alan D. Schrift (London: Routledge, 1997), 256: "The aporia of the gift as Derrida presents it takes the following form: if what defines the gift is its difference from the object of exchange, then any form of reciprocity or return to the giver destroys the gift precisely by turning it into an object of exchange. There is, therefore, a problem of how one accepts a gift, a question of whether one can even receive a gift without destroying it *qua* gift. It is not only that an exchange of gifts is, on these terms, strictly speaking not an act of giving. Even gratitude returns the gift to the giver and compromises its gratuitous character. Even to refuse it, is to acknowledge it and so, in a sense, give a return. The problem is still more acute in the case of the giver: how can the giver not be aware of giving? Insofar as the giver is conscious of doing something good in giving, is not its gratuitous character compromised? This leads Derrida to ask if the conditions of possibility of the gift are not the conditions of its impossibility."

In order to explore why Derrida sees the introduction of the gift to rationality as impossible, it will be worth it to delve more deeply into the two agents in which the impossibility of the rational gift finds its origins: the donor and the donee. Derrida argues that before the donee even receives the gift, the gift is already sabotaged by the donor's intent to give. Let us begin by analyzing the difficulties the gift presents for the donor. This will take a good deal of explication and argument, so it will be a while yet before we can analyze the role of the donee and the donee's difficulties with regard to the gift event.

## **1.2 Desire and Duty**

The donor's intent to give a gift annuls the gift by drawing it within the horizon of economic reciprocity before it even has a chance to rupture this horizon. In this way, the gift cannot even get off the ground. Derrida identifies two ways in which gifts find themselves absorbed back into circular economy, which I will refer to as desire and duty. Let us begin with an analysis of desire.

By desire I refer to any sort of self-interested reason for giving the gift, or self-interested payback that one may pay oneself. This is the trouble the husband had when he attempted to give his wife a gift of flowers. How is one to give a gift with no thought for oneself? This dilemma is the reason that Derrida portrays the gift as a prodigality that exceeds calculation; if the husband thinks even for a moment about himself and approves of his conduct, he has turned the potential gift event into an exchange in which he receives a pleasant feeling in place of the



flowers. In addition, he will likely receive gratitude from his wife, an additional payment for the loss of the flowers.

This dilemma holds necessarily only if humans are understood primarily as acquisitive egos promoted by self-interest. Such an understanding is implicit in Caputo's explication of

*Given Time*:

A intends to give B to C, an idea which trades in the coin of intentional consciousness and self-identical elements. 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.<sup>17</sup>

Caputo is stating here that intentional subjectivity is inherently self-interested. The fact that Caputo sees in this formulation the impossibility of the gift shows that there exists within Caputo's explanation the belief that humans are essentially self-interested egos, so that self-awareness is built atop a deeper structure of self-interest. This makes it impossible for an individual aware of what he is doing to do anything not primarily motivated by self-interest, which is always already at work to sabotage the gift event. Hence Derrida's conclusion that the gift, when it appears, must not appear *as gift* to the donor, must not *appear* at all. Again, it must be recalled that Derrida is not saying that gifts do not occur, only that if a gift event happens, it must happen outside of the horizon of self-interested desire. If self-interest is constitutive of self-awareness, then it follows that gifts must happen outside of the horizontal structure of intentionality.

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<sup>17</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 163.

A short investigation of a philosophy founded on self-interested desire should make clear why gifts cannot appear within it. Perhaps the philosophical system in which self-interest is most clearly posited (and approved of) as the primary structure of humans is Ayn Rand's objectivism. Objectivist Gary Hull, in his account of love, explains that:

to love a person is selfish because it means that you value that particular person, that he or she makes your life better, that he or she is an intense source of joy--to you... The time, effort and money you spend on behalf of someone you love are not sacrifices, but actions taken because his or her happiness is crucially important to your own... You love someone because he or she is a value--a selfish value to you, as determined by your standard--just as you are a value to him or her.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that a gift, as defined earlier, could not possibly come to exist in such a philosophy. The gifts which we would attempt to give can only be given out of an interest in making the other person happy, which itself is simply a self-interested desire for your own happiness. The economics of exchange are not hidden here beneath a façade of generosity; rather, we can see that the motivation for the gift was only ever a desire for our own happiness. The gift event as envisioned by Derrida could never occur within such a horizon. While objectivism is the most extreme version of a self-interested economics, the reasons for why the gift would be annulled within it are the same for self-interest in general.

An objection to Derrida at this point may be that humans are not primarily acquisitive egos, but dutiful subjects. After all, it is ordinarily understood that people often act in ways that are contrary to their desires because they acknowledge that they must obey a moral code.

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<sup>18</sup> Gary Hull, "This Valentine's Day Celebrate the True Meaning of Love," *Capitalism Magazine*, February 7, 2008, <http://www.capmag.com/article.asp?ID=4896/>.

Obligation can countermand desire, so that we do our duty through an act of will that supercedes our self-interested motivations.

Derrida convincingly addresses the objection that humans might primarily be dutiful subjects. In fact, he precludes the possibility of dutiful gifts from the very beginning. His etymological definition of “economy” as the *law* of the partitioning of property refers explicitly to a kind of obligation: “as soon as there is law [*nomos*], there is partition: as soon as there is *nomy*, there is economy.”<sup>19</sup> The gift being aneconomic, it cannot exist within the strictures that demand it be given and require calculation of what should be given. The duty-bound subject, to be sure, is not motivated by self-interest.<sup>20</sup> The person who devotes herself to the good and selflessly pursues it may be as free from self-interest as possible, but Derrida’s aporia will still constrain her, as an obligation that demands of her that she give a gift paradoxically annuls the possibility of the gift at all.

The issue of duty, then, seems to be in genuine conflict with the ordinary definition of a gift. There is little argument about whether one can give a gift primarily because it benefits the donor. Likewise, the definition of the gift as “free,” both in terms of cost to the donee and in terms of the motivation of the donor, seems to deny the possibility of a dutiful gift. Yet the connection between gifts and duty does not lie far beneath the surface of the issue. Gifts are

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> It could be argued that even the dutiful subject acts unconsciously out of self-interest. The psychological egoist would deny the possibility that anyone does anything for other than self-interested reasons, and so would claim I am wasting my time considering this possibility. Yet this view seems to me to be self-defeating. If the psychological egoist truly believes this, then he cannot avoid admitting that any proclamation of truth must itself be done only from subjective, self-interested desires. If this is so, I have no reason to believe that the psychological egoist is providing me with the truth rather than simply what he would like to believe is true. It could then be argued that people *normally* act out of self-interest, with only the occasional act from obligation. Since this admits at least the possibility that humans can act from reasons other than self-interest, I feel comfortable shelving the debate over from what reasons humans ordinarily act and addressing what dutiful subjecthood might be like.

often given moral significance in our daily lives, such that they are linked more closely to duty than the ordinary definition suggests. For instance, there is Caputo's example of the birthday present. A mother who fails to give her son a birthday present has, in most people's minds, done something wrong. She is failing at one of the duties of being a mother. It might be objected, as Caputo claims, that this is precisely why a birthday present cannot be a gift. But even spontaneous gifts can acquire this sort of moral significance. While it seems unlikely that small gifts given for no particular reason are called for, it does seem that someone who fails utterly to ever give such gifts is seen as deficient. While there is no duty to give such a gift at any particular time, a friend who *never* gives such a gift is seen as ungracious, thoughtless, or discourteous; these are not merely descriptive terms, they are normative. So gifts, in our daily lives, seem *demanded*, and so appear to be made impossible by this very demand.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, many philosophers have perceived that there is a problem with gifts if their philosophies give them a moral weight (insofar as this will make it impossible to give gifts in any way but dutifully, thus causing them to cease being gifts), and so they opt to assign gifts an amoral status. This preserves gifts as freely given, but denies them any moral significance.

This investigation into the ways in which the donor can have the gift event sabotaged brings out Derrida's argument more clearly. Derrida begins with the definition of the gift as something given freely for another. That is, it must be given outside of the economy of duty

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<sup>21</sup> There is a body of work in existence that deals with the question of whether supererogation is possible. A supererogatory act is one that is both morally praiseworthy and which is not required by duty; it is an act that goes beyond the call of duty. It would seem that perhaps this could provide an escape from the problem of how to maintain the moral value often attributed to gifts: while gifts are not strictly *required*, their moral worth is obtained by way of the extravagant and uncalled-for decision to give them. However, this would imply that someone who never gave gifts could be held up as a paradigm of moral behavior. This does not seem to match up with the issue at hand, which is that such a person is ordinarily understood to be selfish and morally flawed. Hence, I do not think a discussion of supererogation will suffice to account for the morality of the gift.

("given freely") and the economy of desire ("for another"). Desire constrains this "for another" aspect of gifts, because it turns the gift into a means of acquisition. We congratulate ourselves for giving the gift and reap this good feeling as well as the gratitude which we are paid. Duty, on the other hand, constrains the freedom of gifts because it would require them. Therefore, Derrida concludes, gifts cannot be given so long as the "I" is in the picture and we must escape to some sort of non-calculative horizon in which the gift can occur.

There is, however, a hidden proposition in this argument required for its validity. This conclusion is only necessary if humans are primarily self-interested egos or dutiful subjects. That the "I" must be removed from the gift event presupposes that the "I" operates either through self-interested acquisition of what I desire or dutiful obedience to what is required. That is, Derrida is working from the perspective that humans are primarily economic. While I agree with Derrida that both of these possibilities would annul the gift, I disagree that humans are primarily either one or the other, and so disagree that the "I" must be removed from the picture and that gifts must come to be given in some way that hides them from the view of both donor and donee. My reasons for disagreeing can be understood through an investigation into both of Derrida's economic horizons, beginning with duty and then moving on to desire.

## CHAPTER 2: THE ECONOMIC EGO

### 2.1 The Gift in Kant

That the giving of gifts is often considered to be a moral good is clear from the social importance placed upon being a gracious and giving person. Yet if the definition of gifts is that they are given freely, the notion of a “dutiful gift” becomes contradictory. Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy is an example of a philosophy in which a gift that is given freely cannot obtain a moral value. A deeper investigation of why this is so will serve to bring out the unusual nature of gifts when seen as a moral phenomenon.

For Kant, an action is good only if its motivation is duty. Duty is the only moral motivation possible, so that any other kind of motivation must necessarily be of an amoral or immoral sort. If I were to push a small child out of the way of an oncoming truck, risking my own life in the process, it would appear that I had acted morally. However, if my reason for doing so was that I simply liked pushing small children and this seemed as good an opportunity as any to get away with it, it was no more than fortuitous that my motivation led to the act that appeared moral in every other way. “For a motive to be a moral motive,” Barbara Herman explicates

it must provide the agent with an interest in the moral rightness of his actions. And when we say that an action has moral worth, we mean to indicate...that the agent acted dutifully from an interest in the rightness of his action: an interest that therefore makes its being a right action the nonaccidental effect of the agent’s concern.<sup>22</sup>

An agent cannot, therefore, act morally without being motivated by the rational conclusion of an interest in the action’s morality. Because my motivation for pushing the little girl was not

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<sup>22</sup> Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6.

interested in moral justification, but in how best to meet my desires, it cannot count as a moral motivation and I did not act from duty.

In such a world as this, gifts seem problematic. On the one hand, they often strike us as being morally significant, and in these cases they ought to be given out of duty.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, a gift given dutifully fails to meet Derrida's definition of a gift as freely given. This definition is not arbitrary: we are disinclined to be very grateful for a gift if told upon receiving it that the donor did it because she "had to."

Kant is not oblivious to the issue at hand. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he observes that "there are certain moral endowments such that anyone lacking them could have no duty to acquire them."<sup>24</sup> He lists four such endowments, of which two are particularly interesting for the present study. The first is love:

*Love* is a matter of *feeling*, not of willing, and I cannot love because I *will* to, still less because I *ought* to (I cannot be constrained to love); so a *duty to love* is an absurdity... Every duty is *necessitation*, a constraint, even if this is to be self-constraint in accordance with a law. What is done from constraint, however, is not done from love.<sup>25</sup>

Kant here distinguishes between what we feel and what we will. A feeling is something that happens to us, whereas we are in control of what we will. Because acting from a sense of duty involves apprehending a moral motivation and acting upon it, we cannot have a duty to feel a certain way; we cannot bring about a feeling, and so we cannot have a duty to do so.

This is not to say that we get to behave *as though* we do not love others. On the contrary:

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<sup>23</sup> This does not preclude us from *also* feeling good about giving the gift. Kant's claim is not that we must have no other motivations present in us when we do good, only that the motivation on which we are acting must be that of duty. Were this not the case, we could only do good when we sorely wished we did not have to.

<sup>24</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 159.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

To *do good* to other human beings insofar as we can is a duty, whether one loves them or not...But *hatred of them* is always *hateful*, even when it takes the form merely of completely avoiding them...without active hostility toward them. For benevolence always remains a duty, even toward a misanthropist, whom one cannot indeed love but to whom one can still do good.<sup>26</sup>

So although we cannot have a duty to love another, we can (and often do) have a duty to act *as though* we love the other. This seems intuitively correct. A father has an obligation to his daughter to take care of her in a compassionate, caring way, regardless of whether he does or does not love her. He cannot have a duty to love her in the first place, for this is a moral feeling over which he has no control. Kant believes, however, that by behaving as though he loves his daughter, the father will eventually come to love her: “*Beneficence* is a duty. If someone practices it often and succeeds in realizing his beneficent intention, he eventually comes actually to love the person he has helped...*Do good* to your fellow human beings, and your beneficence will produce love of them in you.”<sup>27</sup>

There is something unusual about Kant’s position here. He seems to think that it would be better to behave with love toward others when we act morally, but it is unclear from where this worth could come from. If the source of moral value resides solely in actions made from duty, it is unclear how an emotion could be relevant. Kant addresses *moral feeling* as another of the “moral endowments” which we can have no duty to acquire. He defines this as “the susceptibility to feel pleasure or displeasure merely from being aware that our actions are consistent with or contrary to the law of duty.”<sup>28</sup> In discussing moral feeling we see Kant making a slightly more explicit claim about non-dutiful good. He claims that humans all already

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 160.



possess moral feeling to greater or lesser extents, and that we have no duty to obtain it, for we have it already. We do, however, have a duty “to *cultivate* it and to strengthen it through wonder at its inscrutable source.”<sup>29</sup> Why, though, should we have to do so? It would certainly make being moral more pleasurable if we were to cultivate it in such a way that we enjoyed being moral. Yet this does not seem to have any bearing on our *obligation* to do so. I might discover that my pleasure at being moral was increased by treating myself to candy every time I did something moral, but doing so is simply rewarding and perhaps positively reinforcing a will that was already dutiful and moral in the first place.

Kant is trying to give an account of a cultivation of virtue, one which is troublesome when combined with duty. After all, if such cultivation itself is a duty, it seems that our virtuous nature is something willed. Yet we often do not will our virtue; a coward, however much he might wish to be brave, remains scared. He might overcome this fear in order to perform his duty, but the fear is not something under his rational control. Likewise with love: the father who does not love his daughter might feel a crippling guilt at the absence of this affection, but he cannot simply will it into existence. Love’s presence is also something we cannot will away: we might wish we were not in love with a particular person, but at best we can cut ourselves off from this person and hope that the feeling is starved into nonexistence (this is, of course, not guaranteed).

A *duty* to cultivate a *virtue* or a *feeling*, then, might seem contradictory, and Kant is aware of this. Yet being virtuous, for Kant, is surely good. His reason for this seems to be primarily that it enables us to perform our duties more ably, but this cannot be a source of moral

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

good for two reasons. First, the addition of a pleasant moral feeling to the performance of a duty does not necessarily better ground that performance in a moral motivation. It might make such a performance more likely, but this cannot be a source of moral praise for this particular action. And second, Kant is explicit that virtue includes types of feeling (such as love) that are beyond our capacity to bring about in ourselves.

If by cultivation, Kant means the willing of a feeling, then he is surely wrong. If, however, he means a kind of openness to the possibility of a feeling, this seems unproblematic. A father who does not love his daughter and so decides to shut down emotionally when he is near her is clearly doing his utmost to prevent any possibility of ever loving her. This *is* an act of will, one that is capable of transgressing a duty to be *open* to the possibility of a feeling. If this is Kant's position, the second objection will not hold.

The first objection, however, seems incontrovertible, and this is enlightening for the issue of the gift. For if we want to insist that a benevolent, giving person is morally superior to a miserly, misanthropic person who nonetheless gives because he knows he is supposed to, then we must admit that there is moral significance to these values that exceeds the acts performed. Such a worth cannot come from duty, for that is precisely what is being surpassed. It would be wrong to praise the person who is naturally benevolent through no act of willpower, for they have performed no action to praise, but we recognize that the miser is in some way deficient in comparison. When we say it is better to be a benevolent person rather than a miser, we do not intend to say that the benevolent person is better because they will have an easier, more pleasant life. We mean that the benevolent person is morally superior in some way. The father who fails to love his daughter, through no fault of his own, is lacking a virtue that fathers require. He may

be morally heroic if he goes through life performing the duties of a father as though he loved his daughter, but he himself recognizes the deficiency within himself. Kant would, of course, deny that this is possible, for moral value cannot come except through dutiful action. Yet his own insistence that we will come to love others if we only behave as though we do, despite the fact that this is surely not a universal truth, seems to belie a problem in his account of moral reality: that we attribute moral worth to virtues, but cannot have a duty to obtain them through our own will.

Benevolence, or the giving of gifts with genuine enjoyment, often falls within the strictures of duty. Friends give each other gifts that are perfectly morally permissible, and sometimes (on certain occasions, such as birthdays and weddings) morally required, but rarely would we claim that this is the primary motivation behind giving a gift. Even in the cases where giving a gift is a duty, we tend to see a failure if that is the reason behind giving the gift. I would be rightly irritated if, upon my birthday, my family gave gifts to me and reminded me that they would rather have not done so, but seeing as how it is my birthday they figured they should. In a further scenario, if they gave me the presents and were genuinely happy, but were quick to make sure I knew that their happiness was incidental and that they still gave only out of a sense of duty, it would take the wind out of their benevolence. Such overdetermination of moral actions is dealt with in Kant, but he naturally insists that for the action to be moral it must find its motivation primarily in duty.

Yet if gifts are going to have moral value, and if they must be given in accordance *with* duty but not primarily *from* duty, why do we give gifts? We give *for* the other. This is the reason, I think, that duty conflicts with the gift in such an unusual way. In most of our actions,

we must wrestle with a universal law that prescribes actions in general. Yet gifts (though not only gifts) must find their motivation in our appreciation of the other to whom we are giving. Appreciation, however, is not something of which we can claim to be the source. When we appreciate a fine wine or a painting, the other object is the focal point of this appreciation, and we are moved to place the significance of the experience in the other itself. In this sense, to give to the other out of appreciation to the other is to give *from* the other. That is, the other is the source of the motivation to give in the first place, not myself.

This is problematic for Derrida's original model of the gift event. When he defines the gift-event simply enough as "A gives B to C,"<sup>30</sup> he makes it seem as though gifts can be adequately described as originating from A. Yet A is only giving because of an appreciation for C in the first place. This appreciation is a kind of gratitude, an appreciation *for* C. And if this is so, C has already given a gift to A. So the roles of donor and donee have become entangled; all gifts are preceded by a previous gift to which the new gift is a response. Hence, Derrida's account in *Given Time*, in which he begins to explore the temporality of the gift event and to look into the import of the temporal gap between the gift and gratitude, overlooks the fact that the notions of gift and gratitude are inseparable.

An account of duty that is underpinned by recognition of the moral import of the other sounds Levinasian, and this is no coincidence, for Levinas's dissatisfaction with universal moral laws about how to treat others is rooted in just such a recognition. While Kant has provided an account of the economic ego, one in which the ego is primarily dutiful, Levinas will argue

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, 11.

vehemently that the ego is primarily desirous and acquisitive, such that only the rupture of the other into its world can destroy its centrality and allow for the advent of morality.

## 2.2 The Gift in Levinas

Levinas begins his essay “The Primacy of Ontology” with an admission that it would appear obvious that ontology is the foundational area of philosophy. As he points out, “ontology not only crowns our practical relations with being...it is the essence of all relation with beings, and even of all relation in being. Does not the fact that beings are ‘open’ belong to the fact of their being?”<sup>31</sup> However, Levinas wants to question the primacy of reasoning and understanding which this account of ontology takes for granted. Does reason precede language, he asks, or is it possible that language is based on a relation that precedes both understanding and reason?

In order to explore this question, Levinas investigates our encounter with the other. Heideggerians, he notes, might say that this will not help him, for to encounter the other is to encounter a being; beings, they will say, are always interpreted and understood in a certain way, placed at a certain point within the world against a particular horizon. Levinas is suspicious that this is really the case when it comes to the other. The other is not like other beings. Whereas we let beings be within our hermeneutical horizons, so that it is a prerequisite that we understand them with regard to our projects, the other is not so encountered. We do not understand the other prior to our encounter; he is an interlocutor, a peer, so that when we want to understand him we are forced to address him. Language, Levinas notes, is the condition of addressing the other, of

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<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4.

realizing his existence as other at all. If we want to come to understand the other, it is necessary for us to enter into a dialogue.

In this dialogue with the other we express ourselves to the other. Our very understanding of the other is wrapped up in our expressions of ourselves to the other. However, this dialogical relationship, this addressing and expressing to the other, is a condition of our understanding the other. As such, it is irreducible to understanding. If this is the case, Levinas has successfully found a more primordial ground than understanding. Because of understanding's ties to ontology, where understanding is that means whereby we grasp beings in their being, it would seem that Levinas's account of our encounter with the other precedes even Heidegger's fundamental ontology.

Levinas "repudiate[s] the Heideggerian conception that views solitude in the midst of a prior relationship with the other;"<sup>32</sup> Heidegger's existentials of being-with does not, Levinas insists, give the other its ruptural due. While Heidegger acknowledges that we always already exist amidst other beings, and even amidst other Daseins, these others are always encountered within the totalizing structure of transcendence in which we assimilate them into our worlds. Rather than the incorporation of others within our hermeneutical framework, Levinas wants to emphasize the way in which others crack open our worlds. The other is a rupture of the ontological world, "a relation with depth rather than with a horizon – a gap in the horizon."<sup>33</sup> Whereas givenness to the understanding requires us to construe a being as something it is not, to symbolize it, to mediate it by way of our hermeneutical framework, the other is a being which

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<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 40.

<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 10.

has its own meaning, which does not allow for mediation: “it means by itself.”<sup>34</sup> Hence, we must abandon our idea of a solitary individual who encounters others. Levinas is careful to explain that such an exceeding of solitude “will not be a knowledge, because through knowledge, whether one wants it or not, the object is absorbed by the subject and duality disappears. It will not be an ecstasis, because in ecstasis the subject is absorbed in the object and recovers itself in its unity. All these relationships result in the disappearance of the other.”<sup>35</sup> Because of this unique role, it precedes understanding; indeed, understanding simply cannot grasp the other without relying first upon a more primordial mode of encountering a being. This is the dialogue with the Face.

The Face, according to Levinas, is “this nudity which is a call to me – an appeal but also an imperative.”<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere he emphasizes that it is “nakedness, helplessness, perhaps an exposure to death.”<sup>37</sup> In each case, the Face is that which calls us to be ethical. It calls out for us to succor it, to do no violence to it. This includes actual acts of physical violence, but extends also to acts of metaphysical violence, in which we reduce the Face to simply another being in our world.<sup>38</sup> Levinas’s ethics, then, cannot begin in the way ethics ordinarily begins: an appeal to a universal law. Such a beginning would inevitably lead to the reduction of the Face to one among many other beings. By answering the question “How ought I to behave with regard to *this*

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Being-for-the-Other,” in *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 115.

<sup>37</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Intention, Event, and the Other, in *Is It Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 145.

<sup>38</sup> “On Levinas’s reading, this reduction of alterity is the violence against the other: the same is integrally violent insofar as it necessitates that otherness appear only on the condition that its alterity be reduced to a comprehensible alterity.” Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 5.

person?” with “As I would behave to *any* person,” I have covered up the ruptural nature of the Face. Such a particular phenomenon as the Face cannot be captured within any universalized system, for such a system is inherently totalizing and so inherently violent to the Face.

We are called by the Face, then, to defend it, to aid it, to give ourselves over to it utterly. To do anything less, to keep our own desires and interests in the backs of our minds, would be to enforce our own whims on the Face. “Subjectivity is being a hostage,”<sup>39</sup> says Levinas, and he does not mean this to be taken metaphorically. In the moment we encounter the Face it has a claim on us, one in which we must give without end to it. The difficulty with doing so is a perpetual desire to kill the other, sometimes physically, but always metaphysically. As rupture, the Face of the other upsets our world; our primacy as the center of our framework is challenged by the entrance of the Face, which threatens to undo not only our primacy, but our entire framework. Hence, “there is...in the Face of the other always the death of the other and thus, in some way, an incitement to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to completely neglect the other – and at the same time (and this is the paradoxical thing) the Face is also the ‘Thou Shalt not Kill.’”<sup>40</sup> We always desire to kill the Face, even if only by reducing it to one being amongst others in our world, in order to reestablish our dominance. Yet this desire is inherently repressive, and so cannot be the originary encounter with the Face; as repression, it stems from the primordial encounter with the other in which we are called to give ourselves over to it.

The influence of Levinas on Derrida can be seen in Derrida’s conclusion mentioned in the last section. In order for the gift to occur, Derrida insists, the “I” must be removed from the

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<sup>39</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 127.

<sup>40</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 104.



gift event, as it always serves to reintroduce the gift back into a calculative economy. Likewise for Levinas, the “I” must be done away with in the event of the other. We must give ourselves over to the other in order to avoid our own projection from appropriating the other for our own purposes, fitting it into its proper place within our world. In this way, Levinas and Derrida both perceive the “I” as fundamentally economic, and it is this that demonstrates Levinas’s influence on Derrida.

Levinas’s attempt to work through an asymmetrical ethics in which the other takes me hostage is his attempt to respond to this theory of the economic ego. This might seem enable an account of the possibility of the gift event. In Levinas’s philosophy we see the acquisitive ego overcome; the focus on the other can make it seem as though he has designed an ethic in which we do nothing but give gifts to the other. However, as Derrida has already pointed out to us, this cannot be; Levinas has simply shifted over to a dutiful subject who is responding to the call of the Face in which he finds himself claimed by the other. A gift remains im-possible in Levinas’s philosophy, however the emphasis on the other might make it seem to be amenable to the gift event’s possibility.

So Derrida’s account of the im-possibility of the gift event shows Levinas’s influence, insofar as his account contains within it the theory of the economic ego. However, Derrida understands this economy as showing itself in both self-interested acquisition and dutiful obedience (even if it is thoroughly other-oriented). In a way, this demonstrates an advance on Levinas’s criticism of the totalizing ego, as it addresses the objection that we can escape economy by being dutiful. However, if both Levinas and Derrida are incorrect about the “I” as a primarily economic structure, this would cast doubt on Derrida’s claim that the gift event must in

some way exclude the “I” and remain hidden from its view. I take issue with precisely this notion of the “I” as primarily economic. In the next section, I will demonstrate that Levinas’s own philosophy precludes the possibility of the “I” as primarily self-interested.

### 2.3 The Ego as Otherly

Throughout Levinas’s corpus there is an interesting tension at work. On the one hand, Levinas argues that the ego is always a totalizing force that perpetrates a metaphysical violence on the other. On the other hand, Levinas believes that we can surpass this egoistic existence by giving ourselves over to the other and recognizing our infinite call to duty to the other. Yet, as mentioned in the previous section, insofar as we repress the other by forcing the other to correspond to our world, we are always already aware of the other *as* other. If we were not so aware, we would be incapable of recognizing the other as a potential threat to our worldview in which we are the central feature. Prior to any attempt to totalize the world, there must be recognition of a beyond that is irreconcilable with our totality.<sup>41</sup>

Levinas seems to be aware of the fact that the ego’s tendency to totalize must come after a recognition of the other. He states that

...when I say that consciousness in the relationship with the other loses its first place...I mean to say that, in consciousness thus conceived, there is the awakening to humanity. The humanity of consciousness is definitely not in its powers, but in its responsibility: in passivity, in reception, in obligation with regard to the other. It is the other who is first, and there the question of my sovereign consciousness is no longer the first question.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Jerome A. Miller’s *The Way of Suffering: A Geography of Crisis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1989) is an excellent study of the myriad ways in which we repress experiences that threaten our own totalizing worldviews, and has proved influential to this entire essay.

<sup>42</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 112.

Here Levinas breaks with the idea of a unified, solitary ego that first exists and then encounters others. Rather, the encounter with the other is primary. In fact, he goes further, arguing that the manner in which the Face calls me to responsibility is “not a privilege; it is the fundamental characteristic of the human person as morally responsible. Responsibility is an individuation, a principle of individuation.”<sup>43</sup> So, not only is Levinas attempting to overturn the myth of a sovereign subject, he wants to demonstrate that we find ourselves in the Face of the other. Our selves are given over to us when we are called to our duty toward the other.

While this insight is potentially profound, there lies within it a difficulty for Levinas’s philosophy. If I myself am to some extent given by the other, then it is necessary that I am not some self-identical, self-grounded ego. If at my very core resides an individuating call to responsibility, then the other is always already within me. And if this is so, then there is a profound sense in which *I* am the other. Though this might sound radical, it strikes me as being intuitively correct. I have a body over which I have limited control; I have desires and fears that are constantly pressing upon my rationality, however irrational they may be; I have preferences that I never consciously chose. I am not in control of my body’s sensory experience of pain, or of my irrational arachnophobia that has always been present, or of my intense love for bacon and abhorrence of cheese. All of these characteristics are part of what constitutes me as a person, and yet there is a way in which they are *not* me. Levinas is adding one more heterogeneous element to the heteronomy that pervades my own self.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 108.

If this is so, then there is never an encounter of the Face to Face between myself and the other. That is, my own relationship with myself is fraught with the kind of otherness that Levinas takes to be definitive of our encounters with other people. Levinas is aware that we are often in the presence of more than the single other; it is for this reason that he develops a notion of the Third, in which we are unable to reconcile our infinite responsibilities to two individuals and so must rationalize between them both; this is the practice of justice. However, the discovery of the other at the very heart of the “I” means that we always exist in a state of justice, in the presence of a Third. If, as Levinas argues, we are individuated by the encounter with the other, but this encounter also gives us to ourselves *as* otherly, then we are entangled in justice from the start.

This complication is not a proof that Levinas’s philosophy as a whole is mistaken, but it does mean that any idea within his philosophy of the ego as essentially totalizing is mistaken. Levinas’s insight that egos are essentially economical cannot mean that egos are essentially acquisitive, for this fails to recognize that they are not self-identical structures that could even *have* the capacity to be primarily acquisitive. The trouble for the gift, within Levinas’s framework, is that the ego remains economical. Though it cannot be primarily acquisitive, Levinas argues that the ego is caught up immediately in the radical duty to the other. My argument in this section is intended to demonstrate that such a duty cannot get off the ground, for we are always in the presence of both the otherness within myself and the otherness of the other. This prevents any kind of self-grounding project that gives myself primacy, but it also prevents the kind of radical duty Levinas intends. There is always a Third present, and so we are always engaging in a project of justice. Such a project remains one of duty, albeit a duty less radical

than what Levinas intended. And as dutiful, the self remains economical. Hence, Derrida's claim that the conditions for the possibility of the gift require either the annulment of the gift or the annulment of the "I" remains.

Levinas has shown the idea that we are self-given acquisitive egos to be unviable. Yet he turns to the project of us as dutiful egos as an alternative. That the horizon of duty is unviable has not been shown, nor need it be; the section on Kant was not intended to demonstrate that Kant was wrong about duty. However, it did demonstrate that duty seems unable to encompass the entire moral reality in which we exist, so that perhaps the claim that humans are primarily dutiful might prove false. If this is so, it is important to understand what alternative view of humans might be possible, and to what extent it is or is not an economic view of the ego.

This chapter has revealed two primary facts. One, learned from the analysis of Kant, is that gifts are given *for* the other and *from* the other. All gifts are given in gratitude for previous gifts. The second, derived from the analysis of Levinas, is that we are other, that we have within us the very otherness that calls out to us. And insofar as this forces us to abandon any project of self-origination or self-grounding, it also forces us to acknowledge that there is a very real sense in which we *receive* ourselves *as given*. The next chapter will investigate the claim that our own relationship with ourselves is one of a donee to its received gift, whether this could lead to an alternative view of the human subject, and whether this view would have any effect on Derrida's aporia.

## CHAPTER 3: BEING A GIFT

### 3.1 The Passionate Self

Let us begin by examining carefully what takes place in the gift event so that we can better bring out how it is that the gift is given both for and from the other. Consider someone who gives her friend a birthday present. For Derrida, the birthday gift is sabotaged in one of two ways. In the one case, the donor is an acquisitive ego and so annuls the gift with her calculation by congratulating herself for ignoring her own interests and considering the debt in which her friend now stands in relation to her. In the other case, the donor is a duty-bound subject who strips the gift of its generosity by considering it a duty she is fulfilling. Neither of these explanations accounts adequately for why (ideally) the donor gives her friend a birthday gift. While it may be the case that the donor ought to be giving a gift (because the donee is such a close friend that a birthday gift is to some extent obligatory), this is not primarily what moves the donor to give a gift. In the same way, it might be illegal to drive without a seatbelt, but this plays no role in my decision to always wear one. The obligation exists, and there would be some sort of failure if it was not obeyed, but it is not primarily what is moving me to either action. The donor is in fact moved by the donee. There is a call-to-give that emanates from the other who we appreciate. The very structure of appreciation is such that when we appreciate something we want to give ourselves over to it. This language of a call is not foreign to duty, as we often speak of “the call of duty.” Yet this is a different sort of call, one that binds us and demands of us a certain action. The call-to-give cannot be such a demand, or else the appreciation would be reduced to a duty when it is the sort of thing that cannot be willed in the first place.

This reduction of appreciation to duty is the mistake that Levinas makes when he gives his account of the Face. He perceives that there is a way in which the particular encounter with the other is a call to give succor to the other, but he then goes on to provide us with an ethic of duty. While we can certainly will to abandon ourselves for the other, we cannot will such an appreciation of the other, and this prevents Levinas's phenomenology from adequately incorporating our own experience of the call-to-give. In this experience we do not feel anything is demanded of us, but we also feel a call-to-give in the first place that moves us to give. We might feel, upon seeing a beautiful painting, that we ought to appreciate it; yet this "ought" cannot be a dutiful ought, for we cannot bring about such an appreciation through our sheer willpower. This appreciative "ought" shares a structure with the dutiful "ought," but is more primordial; what calls to us suggests that it deserves appreciation in a manner altogether more fundamental than a kind of dutiful attention. Before we even rationalize a duty or give ourselves a maxim, we experience a call to give of ourselves to the other. The morality of this call can be examined, but prior to any such investigation we are already in the sway of the call.

It is this act of appreciation that reveals our capacity to act as passionate, donative selves. Just as the passions of the ancients were viewed as entities acting upon human subjects, the donor is moved by her friend to appreciate him, to give herself over to him; this movement acts upon her, however, and is not something that she instills in herself. She has the capacity to shut down such a movement by closing herself off to others; this is similar to the earlier discussion about our capacity to close ourselves off to the possibility of falling in love with someone. She also has the capacity to attempt to become more open to the possibility of appreciating something, as Kant argues we have a duty to do. This passionate mode of action is

fundamentally different from that of self-interested acquisition or dutiful obedience, as it finds itself not in desire or willpower, but in devotion to the other. Any number of examples can be drawn of situations in which we feel called to act in an appreciative way: when we are moved to a standing ovation after an incredible performance or when we laugh at a joke with authentic mirth rather than out of politeness. While the incredible performance, like the son, deserves appreciation, none of the audience applauds out of sense of duty; prior to a sense of duty there lies the calling-to-give, an appreciative “ought” that precedes obligation.

This is not to claim that appreciation trumps obligation, so that we no longer have to pay attention to our duties and can simply act in whatever way pleases the other.<sup>44</sup> Appreciation’s place as a more primordial kind of “ought” does not necessarily make it therefore more important. It does, however, make it necessary for the kind of full, genuine moral life that Kant seems to recognize as necessary and so concludes we must dutifully pursue by cultivating our moral emotions. The deficiency of the father who does not love his daughter but performs his responsibilities dutifully does not begin to approach the deficiency of a father who abandons his daughter because he does not love her. The lack of appreciation is not synonymous with a lack of responsibility, only a lack of genuine moral engagement.

With reference to Derrida’s aporia, he may object that, whether we are motivated by duty or some pre-dutiful appreciation, none of this saves the gift from requiring impossibility in order to be realized. This would be a fair objection if duty and appreciation were more similar in their structures than they actually are. As it is, however, there is a crucial difference. The duty-bound

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<sup>44</sup> Levinas’s own moral philosophy seems to suggest that this might be the case. After all, if we are not to reduce the Other to anything less than he is, we must not try to systematize it. We must turn ourselves over to the Other entirely, so that we take his interests on as our own. This leads to many questions: Ought I to help the Other kill himself, if he so wishes? Ought I to allow the Other to rape me, if this is his desire?



subject wills to meet the obligation placed upon her. While she is obliged to give the gift and so is ideally exempt from pride, it is her moral strength and determination which enabled her to do so. The passionate self, on the other hand, does not give the gift in an act of appreciation through sheer strength of will. She is moved to give by something outside of herself, so that as long as she is open to the other and heeds the call-to-give, it is not a sheer act of will to give the gift. Insofar as she is moved to give, the act of giving is set in motion by something other than herself. We might say that there is a kind of grace that moves the gift, rather than that an act of utter willpower. That is, while an act of willpower is ordinarily understood as coming from a self-possessed subject who is the origin of the act, the call-to-give suggests that the origin of an act comes from outside the subject, such that the subject only responds to a call which was always already offered.<sup>45</sup>

At this point Derrida may interject again, reminding us that perhaps the passionate self will feel pride as a result of the gift. Once again, it would be a mistake to conflate what occurs in the passionate gift event with what occurs in Derrida's account of a self-interested gift exchange. The acquisitive ego, like the duty-bound subject, attempts to give the gift solely through willpower. What annuls the gift for the acquisitive ego is the irrepressible pride the donor feels in herself the moment she recognizes that she has given a gift. It was her willingness to ignore this self-interest that allowed such generosity. It is impossible, however, for the passionate self

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<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that I use the term "grace" here because I think that it is the word which best accounts for what I am describing. However, it should not be misconstrued as an appeal to dogma or theology. While what I am calling here grace is what I argue makes possible the gift as freely given and is central to my argument, I hope that I have allowed it to come forth on its own so that it may stand without any appeal to faith or tradition. I have no interest in arguing that there is a divine aspect to the gift to which this notion of grace points. I suspect that there are affinities between what in this essay I call "grace" and what religious people refer to as "grace," but these are questions which are beyond the scope of this study.

to feel pride for having given the gift. The call-to-give came from the other, and the grace by which the gift was given does not originate in the sheer will to give of the donor. The passionate donor merely responds to a call, opens the knocked upon door, and can take credit for neither the call nor the knock which are the true source of the gift, nor entirely for opening the door upon hearing the knock, as she was only moved to do so by the knock itself.

This suggests that the passionate self is aware that she is only in the position to give this gift as the result of any number of gifts that she herself has received. In the case of a talented and passionately devoted athlete, she recognizes that only previously received gifts have made possible her athleticism: a sound and able body with good health, parents devoted to her passions, coaches and instructors who give their time, teammates who impart a love of the game, even the existence of the game in the first place. Looking back far enough, every passionate self is aware that she need not necessarily exist, that she did not bring her existence about, that her life was given to her in her birth. The grace by which these gifts have been given to her, placing her in a position to give gifts herself, makes it so that the passionate donor cannot feel pride for her giving. Only by the grace of past gifts has she been able to reach this point, to have what she has to give, and the idea that she should take pride in giving such a gift would seem completely absurd to her.

Grace is what makes possible passionate donativity, a giving which need not be consigned to secrecy and paradox and can be done in the open without recourse to pride or dutifulness. While it is certainly the case that a gift does not accrue credit or incur debt for participants in the gift-event, it only becomes necessary for them to hoodwink each other and themselves in order to make the gift possible (and therefore im-possible) when we think of donor

and donee as essentially acting out of self-interest or a sense of duty. This is not to say that Derrida is, strictly speaking, wrong about the gift being aporetic. It is true that we cannot give gifts within an economic horizon, and perhaps it could be claimed that all I am doing is proposing a new horizon in which the gift occurs. However, I believe this analysis goes deeper.

Derrida argues that rationality and economy are always coupled together. Insofar as economy annuls the gift, then, we must also say that the gift must be irrational, unperceived, given in a fit of prodigal madness. The primordial donativity of subjects dissolves Derrida's understanding of the aneconomic nature of the gift as something irrational. If we were acquisitive egos we would only be able to see the generosity of a freely given gift as mad in its excess, a prodigality that could not be brought under the regimen of reason. If, however, we are passionate selves responding to the goodness of beings, it becomes the case that the acquisitive, domineering attitude of economics would be what was irrational, a fundamental perversion of ourselves, while the prodigality of the gift would make only the most sense. I deny Derrida's claim that the gift can appear only as im-possible; rather, it can appear as the possible provided we understand that the self cannot be appropriately understood as economic. Derrida is so attached to the idea of the aneconomic gift, yet so bewitched by the notion of the economic ego, that he can see reason as being nothing but cold, calculative thinking that attempts to totalize the gift event. The possibility of morally genuine prudence becomes an impossibility as all forms of rationality become a kind of selfishness.

A passionate self, however, would be able to exercise prudence with regard to giving without reducing itself to an economic ego. The passionate self would be able to recognize that she needed to care for herself in order to care for others, that she could not use herself up in her

donativity if she wants to continue giving. Derrida makes it sound as though we must abandon ourselves for the other; this is expanded on by Caputo, who asks “How can I keep the ‘I,’ which is always a principle of calculation and self-interest, out of the picture?” (176). Caputo is correct to note that when we think of ourselves as economic it becomes necessary to excise ourselves from the gift-event entirely, for how else could we avoid letting selfishness or obligation taint our altruism? The passionate self, on the other hand, need not be removed from the gift-event. In its devotion to the other, it is aware that it must take care of itself; while it is free of self-interest, the passionate self may certainly still act rationally and make use of reason to prudently decide how much to give without this being an economic act. One cannot give of oneself if one has given up oneself. This is incompatible with Caputo’s theory, which insists that the only alternative to selfishness is selflessness, keeping oneself “out of the picture.” The donative self is able to consider what it must maintain in order to be able to continue giving, which is neither selfish nor selfless but self-respecting. This allows the donative self to remain in the picture, to keep an eye on himself in order to continue to keep an eye on the other.

This runs this risk of sounding masochistic and self-effacing. Is our only purpose in existence to give gifts to the other? In what way is this theory any different from a more moderate version of Levinas’s hostage theory of ethics? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to turn to the second conclusion of the preceding chapter: that we have otherness built into our very structure.

### 3.2 Unraveling the Aporia

Insofar as a kind of grace is what makes possible not only our giving gifts, but our being anything that we are, we find that any concept of ourselves as self-grounded is absolutely indefensible.<sup>46</sup> The grace by which we find ourselves in a particular situation is often the grace of a particular other, or a small group of others, so that there is a very literal sense in which we can receive our own situation as a gift. The athlete previously mentioned is in her situation by virtue of gifts given by specific others (parents, coaches, other athletes), so that she can actually be appreciative of those others directly. Levinas's insight, however, radicalizes this insight that we are not self-grounded by introducing the concept that not only are we given these situations, we are given ourselves by the encounter with the other. While this may seem drastic, the conversation earlier about our moods, fears, and bodily experiences seem convincing evidence that there is much about us for which we are not responsible. We say it is "my" experience, or "my" mood, or "my" desire; yet we only possess things that are not us already. Even what Kant referred to as the transcendental unity of apperception, the structure of ourselves that unites our experience as happening to "me," could not be construed as something we gave to ourselves. But what are we, except this unified collection of experiences, moods, memories, and desires? There is a very real sense, then, in which I am the other.

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<sup>46</sup> There is a way in which this makes the modern project of the autonomous subject seem quite wrong-headed. This may or may not be true. Descartes, for example, might seem to deny that we are anything but self-grounded, as his *Meditations* attempt to construct a philosophical system from the single epistemological certainty of his own existence. Yet his conclusion, at the end of the *Meditations*, is that God exists and is the source of everything that exists, including himself. If this is so, it might only be the case that Descartes makes the epistemological claim that all of our knowledge must begin from self-grounded autonomy, something that I would still contend is false but that is less clearly contrary to the notion of myself as Other than a claim that we are ontologically self-grounded.

Not only am I the other, however; I am also given to myself by the other. We therefore resemble the structure of gifts: *from* the other and *for* the other. That we are from the other has already been explained. That we are for the other is Levinas's conclusion. This is his reasoning for our utter self-effacement in the Face of the other: if we are given to ourselves by this particular other, we are obliged to him. This obligation takes the form of succoring the other in his defenselessness in order to protect him from my own totalizing violence in which I try to amputate the umbilical cord, as it were, from the other to me. Faced with the choice of self-effacement or totalizing self-centeredness, we often opt for the latter, repressing our otherly origins. Yet Levinas, in developing this philosophy, fails to give due appreciation to his own insight. If I am the other, then I have obligations to myself. And because we are therefore always caught up in a world of justice amongst numerous others, we are allowed to engage in prudential consideration about what we would like for ourselves. Combined with my theory of passionate donativity, we can see that this does not justify self-interested acquisition. What is justified, however, is a self-respecting appreciation for oneself as a gift.

When we are given a gift, we are obligated to care for it. This is not a condition of the gift enforced by the donor; if it were this, the gift would be annulled as it would not be free. It is simply an obligation that goes along with receiving something. This is not problematic for the gift, anymore than the fact that being good friends with someone can often obligate you to give presents to your friend on their birthday. Ideally, caring for the gift need not be seen as a burdensome duty that must be performed only out of obligation; hopefully, one is struck with appreciation at the gift and responds appropriately. This appreciation is gratitude.

In the gift event as envisioned by Derrida, gratitude is a crucial issue. It is in part gratitude that makes the gift so problematic in the first place, as it stems, in Derrida's view, from a feeling of indebtedness on the part of the donee toward the donor. When A gives B to C, A is now worse off and C has made a profit without doing any labor. The response of the donee may actually be to give a gift of equal value back, but more commonly we say "thank you." Derrida's understanding of gratitude is that it involves recognition of debt, an obligation that makes it necessary to pay off what is owed the moment the donee finds himself on the receiving end of the gift-event. This is once again the result of Derrida's identification of humans with economic egos. While in the case of the duty-bound donor it would seem that gratitude on the part of the donee would be unnecessary, as he is only fulfilling an obligation that was owed to the donee, the framework of the acquisitive ego forces us to understand gratitude as an expression of indebtedness, in which we strive to balance the equation of the gift event by returning what was given in the first place. Derrida goes so far as to identify the gift with being in some sense harmful to the donee: "the gift puts the other in debt, with the result that giving amounts to hurting, to doing harm".<sup>47</sup>

In the framework of passionate donativity, gratitude is able to take on a new life. The passionate donee is aware that gifts received are not given solely the power of the donor and are given by grace and the donor's openness to this grace. This makes it impossible for the donee to feel indebted to the donor in the way Derrida describes. As gifts are given out of a sense of appreciation, all gifts stem from gratitude. We are moved by something outside of us to give thanks to it, to give of ourselves in gratitude. We see the value of the other which calls out to us

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<sup>47</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, 12.

to give, and we give thanks for the sheer existence of the other gladly. This comes out clearly in the unique structure of the birthday celebration. The donor celebrates her friend's birth, which made possible the reception of him as a gift to herself, by expressing her gratitude to him with a birthday gift. As mentioned earlier, what Derrida simplistically defined as being "A gives B to C" suddenly becomes much more complex, with the role of donor and donee made nearer in definition until it becomes difficult to imagine how one could fulfill one role without fulfilling the other. Since all gifts are themselves responses to a call-to-give, all gifts become expressions of gratitude. This complicates the ordinary understanding of the gift as primary, something that comes before the gratitude that it is owed. Instead, gifts are both primary and secondary: primary in the sense that we are always already moved to give by the world of gifts around us, and secondary in the sense that our grateful response to this world of gifts is to offer gifts of our own.

It would seem, then, that Derrida's aporia is not so much false as it is misguided. His definition of the gift is appropriate and he is right to insist that a gift event cannot happen within the horizons of desire or duty, or any economy at all. His two mistakes are that he identifies the ego as primarily economic and that he presents the gift event as closely resembling an exchange of commodities, insofar as it involves the transfer of something from and by one person to another person. The former mistake prevents him from perceiving that we need not try to excise the "I" from the gift event, provided that the "I" is not primarily economic. This leads him to the latter mistake that blinds him to the fact that gift events cannot be understood so that gifts are primary and gratitude secondary. The concept of humans as passionate selves unravels this aporia so that gifts are perfectly rational without being economic.



### 3.3 Childbirth and Forgiveness

Before moving on, I want to clarify two particular kinds of gift events that are unique in their excess and are sometimes taken to be paradigmatic of the gift event. These are childbirth and forgiveness. They are both linked because of their prodigality. In the case of childbirth, it is possible to understand the parents as giving their future child the gift of life. That this is often not the motivation behind pregnancy does not avoid the fact that this is a common understanding of the parent-child relationship. Whether this is an accurate account of childbirth is outside of the boundaries of this paper, but it is important to note that if it is an accurate account, this cannot be taken as paradigmatic of the gift in general. When we give gifts we ordinarily give them out of appreciative gratitude to another for whom we are grateful. In the case of childbirth, however, the other to whom the parents give does not even exist yet. In the case of ordinary gifts we give for a reason, gratitude, that cannot exist as it normally does in the case of childbirth.

In the case of forgiveness, it would seem that we find the kind of prodigal madness that Derrida thought might be necessary for the gift itself. In fact, Derrida wrote on the impossibility of forgiveness as well.<sup>48</sup> With regard to forgiveness, however, I am more inclined to say that it is possible that forgiveness is literally impossible. Consider something as relatively easily reparable as an act of petty theft: a man steals something of trifling importance from his friend, say, a cheap plastic comb. Afterward, feeling guilty, he returns the comb, along with an offer to take his friend out for a nice dinner to make up for any additional inconvenience, and a heartfelt

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *On Forgiveness and Cosmopolitanism*, (London: Routledge, 2001).

apology. Surely there is nothing left to hold against the thief? He has returned the property and then some and is genuinely contrite. Is the friend obligated to forgive him? Derrida would say no, because there remains an element which the thief cannot erase: his initial violation. His commission of a wrongful act might have its results mediated, but that commission remains as a wound to the friend, one which the friend is not capable of willing himself to heal. It would certainly be easier if our past actions could be undone, but the static nature of the past is such that we are condemned to live our lives out looking back on memories which cannot change.

This does not mean we ought to do nothing about our past mistakes; mistakes have effects which carry through into the present and through the future, and it is true that we can often do things to try to mediate these effects, as with the just-mentioned thief who both wanted to prevent his friend from being inconvenienced (hence the return of the comb and the offer of dinner) and wanted to go as far as possible to erasing the event as he is capable of doing. However, the directionality of time being futural, we are unable to return to the past to erase what we have done, and we carry our past with us into the future. Hence, the thief and his friend are both trapped in a present which carries with it the past violation and the wound opened up by the theft of the comb, the betrayal of trust which cannot simply be effaced from history.

An objection to this reading is that the friend is simply holding a grudge, something that is itself a moral failure. The thief is regretful, he is eager to do right by his friend; why should the friend withhold his forgiveness so callously, causing his friend perhaps greater distress than he himself has suffered as a result of the theft of the comb? I think that this is to misunderstand the friend as being capable of willing his forgiveness, as though he were in possession of it. He may be moved to forgive, but people are not capable of willing themselves to feel mercy. This is

particularly so because the act of forgiveness involves a loving response to an unlovable action. That is, one cannot simply say that there are many other aspects about the thief that are lovable, so that we can love them and exclude or ignore the theft and thereby come to love the thief. Such is the mindset behind the cliché “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” This is disingenuous; the person is made up to some extent by their choices and the acts they perform, and one of these acts is that of theft. If we simply ignore those morally problematic acts, we are ignoring the acts which make forgiveness necessary in the first place. The very part of the violator that must be forgiven is the part that committed the violation. This need not exactly require that we be defined only as our worst parts; just as I have lied in my life, I have also told the truth, and it would be odd to say that I am an honest liar. However, my honesty is not relevant to the actual instance of my lie. Despite all the other truths I have told, when I stand discovered before the person I have lied to, I cannot appeal to my past and future honesty; I can only admit my wrongdoing, and insofar as I am to be forgiven, it can only be as the liar that I am in the moment of violation.

This makes the act of forgiveness sound crazy. What could possibly move us to respond lovingly to an unlovable feature of a person? How could the rape victim possibly forgive her rapist *as* the rapist he is? Indeed, this makes forgiveness sound impossible, and perhaps it is. That is beyond the scope of this study. What is important is that we not make the mistake in thinking that forgiveness is somehow paradigmatic of gift events in general. We give gifts rationally. If asked, we can respond with a reason why we are giving a gift to someone. Forgiveness, on the other hand, prevents us from giving a reason, for it would be completely

unreasonable to forgive a person *as* the wrongdoer who requires such forgiveness.<sup>49</sup> Forgiveness and childbirth, then, both seem to be kinds of gifts, but are unusual limit cases of gifts that we ought not to think complicate our understanding of how gifts ordinarily work.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Jerome A. Miller, “The Trauma of Evil and the Traumatological Conception of Forgiveness,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 42 (2009): 401-419. My understanding of forgiveness and the irreparable damage caused by the initial violation is thoroughly influenced by Miller’s reading of evil as a historical act that forgiveness can neither undo nor repress.

## CHAPTER 4: THE GIFT OF BEING

### 4.1 The Givenness of Phenomena

Being-given, then, is revealed to be part of our ontological structure, akin to one of Heidegger's existentialia, such as being-with or being-toward-death. Insofar as we exist at all, we always exist as being-given. That we are not aware of this fact is nothing surprising; as Heidegger's analysis of everyday Dasein reveals, our ordinary lives are shot through with repressive techniques for ignoring our impending deaths. Levinas's phenomenology of the Face and his analysis of our response, in which we are called both to give it succor and to murder it, refer to this very kind of repressive structure. Our primordial encounter with our own otherness and with the otherness of the Face terrifies us, as it forces us to acknowledge the falsehood of a self-grounded, self-identical ego; we therefore try to totalize the other, reduce it to a being in our world, in order to cover up our own contingency.

Yet being-given is not solely to do with other humans. While Levinas finds the source of otherness in the Face, I do not see any reason why we must stop there. All beings, it would seem, are otherly. While Levinas argues that dialogue is a precondition for understanding the other, one that still precludes a totalizing understanding, surely there is a profound sense in which we cannot have such a dialogue with a tree. And this tree, by virtue of its staunch unresponsiveness to our attempted dialogue, stands there like in its sheer otherness that resists our understanding.<sup>50</sup> Also, like the Face in particular, others in general give us ourselves. Just as

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<sup>50</sup> Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" (*Basic Writings*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993, 139-212) gives an excellent account of such otherness in his development of the notion of earth. When the work of art puts world and earth into strife, the essentially transcendent and opening nature of world conflicts with the closedness of the earth. The wood in the sculpture, then, is not laid bare for our examination; rather, it is brought out for the first

people in our lives play roles in developing our own selves and our own possibilities, so do objects and locations. Our childhood homes and toys, our clothing, animals, our environments all have a profound effect on who we are. In fact, phenomena in general have such an effect.

That phenomena are given might not seem intuitive. After all, in every other gift event we have explored in depth there is a donee and a donor. While the observer who experiences the phenomenon would fill the position of donee, it is unclear what could constitute the donor. If we say that the phenomenon of a Belgian ale is “given,” can this possibly mean the same thing as when the ale is given as a gift to us by a friend? Indeed, the mere similarity of the word “given” to “gift” need not imply that all things that are given are therefore gifts. After all, we may give a response to an inquiry, or we may say that “ $2 + 2$  gives us 4.” Neither the response nor the arithmetical sum strike us as being particularly gift-like at all, yet they are given. We even sometimes say “gift-giving” in order to clarify we refer to the peculiar kind of giving that takes place in the gift event. Gifts are always given, yet not all instances of giving are gifts. Is this perhaps how it stands with phenomena?

There is perhaps a deeper similarity between phenomena and gifts than has heretofore been suggested. This similarity lies in the fact that we can be appreciative of phenomena, much as we are appreciative of gifts in other people in a way that moves us to give gifts. We see nothing unusual in saying that we appreciate the experience of drinking the ale or of looking at an excellent painting. Introductory courses in the arts are oftentimes labeled precisely as classes in which one learns to appreciate the particular branch of art that it explores (e.g. Music

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time in its mystery. Such a notion of earth has within it an essential understanding of *all* other beings as essentially otherly.

Appreciation). Is this appreciation similar to the gratitude earlier discussed with regard to other people? Can we be grateful to a phenomenon? Is it possible to give a gift to the phenomenon?

In order to address these questions, it would perhaps be useful to briefly consider Jean-Luc Marion's work on the givenness of phenomena. There are few things in life besides gifts that we receive freely; yet every moment we are confronted with phenomenal experiences that fill our sensory and cognitive capacities to their utmost. There is never an occasion in which, failing to do something (beyond staying semi-conscious), we have a dearth of phenomenal experience.

The phenomenological reduction of Husserl's method allows for the phenomena to be abstracted from any sort of metaphysical or ontological couching so as to be examined in its purity. Husserl notes that "every giving intuition is a proper source for knowledge, that all that which is offered originally to us in intuition...must be simply received as that which is given."<sup>51</sup> The reduction is the manner by which we are able to strip the phenomenon of any ideological baggage we might impart to it. Marion's attempt to make phenomenology a "first philosophy"<sup>52</sup> is rooted in his belief that the phenomenological method enables us to have certain knowledge. After all, we cannot doubt the phenomenon itself, for it is happening to us. And "that which can first be known for certain...is first in philosophy, without presupposing anything."<sup>53</sup> That is, insofar as the phenomenological method allows us to do away with any extraneous additions to

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<sup>51</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, Vol. 1, translated by W.R. Boyce Gibson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), 92.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, translated by Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 23.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

the pure phenomenon, it allows us access to indubitable knowledge about the phenomenon. This knowledge, then, is the ground of a first philosophy that cannot be doubted.

One of the things revealed through rigorous phenomenological analysis, Marion argues, is that there is “no reduction that does not lead to a givenness.”<sup>54</sup> Marion believes this because phenomena give themselves to be known, a certain knowledge we come to by way of the phenomenological reduction. Alexius Meinong agrees, arguing that “all that is knowable is given—precisely to the act of knowing. And to the extent to which all objects are knowable, givenness can be attributed to them as a universal property, to all without exception.”<sup>55</sup> Insofar as we reduce a phenomenon, therefore, we come to know it as given to us.

Dominique Janicaud believes that Marion has here slipped back into the metaphysics from which phenomenology was to have removed us:

Marion’s end point is clear, and its phenomenological emptiness can be explained only by a double reference, which the acute reader of his texts recognizes: to the problematic of the overcoming of ontology (or metaphysics), and to the properly theological or spiritual dimension. It is the running together of these two schemas under the cover of phenomenology that is contested here... This strategy... leads us back to an autosufficiency (pure givenness “gives itself”!) that restores *metaphysica specialis*—and its favorite trick, autofoundation—rather than giving it the boot.<sup>56</sup>

In the context of this study, Janicaud’s criticism could be that, by treating phenomena as given, Marion is forced to posit some sort of a donor. By making this donor givenness itself, Marion is importing theological baggage. This is inconsistent with the phenomenological reduction, as it posits a knowledge of something that is simply not present in the pure phenomenon itself.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Dominique Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” translated by Bernard G. Prusak, in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*, edited by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 65.



While I think Janicaud is correct that Marion oversteps the boundaries of phenomenology by positing that givenness gives itself, I am not convinced that he has done damage to Marion's claim that there is a sheer givenness that reveals itself in any phenomenological analysis. After all, the phenomenon is *there*, before you, to be examined. We have done nothing to bring it forth; all we do is excise any residual properties we might bring to it. And insofar as it is given freely it does seem to resemble a gift.

More to the point, many phenomena seem to call out for the same sort of appreciation that we described earlier as constitutive of the origin of the gift. This appreciation makes possible a sort of engagement with a phenomenon; our responsiveness could be understood to bring about a sort of dialogue with the phenomenon, in the Levinasian sense mentioned earlier. This might sound utterly impossible; after all, in the example of the Belgian ale, we merely drink the ale. We might appreciate the experience, and we might even choose to identify the ale as something to which we are grateful, but surely there can be no gift event? After all, the ale simply exists, mindless of whether we are appreciating it or not, incapable of any sort of recognition or apprehension of gifts we might bestow upon it. However, there is also a way in which the ale does *not* simply exist in an objective way; as a phenomenon, it is perpetually given over to us in its fullness. When we are open to this fullness, when we are attentive to the ale rather than drinking it carelessly, it reveals itself to us in an infinitely deep and rich manner. Even if we were to memorize every nuance of flavor and mouthfeel, each individual phenomenal experience would present us with another opportunity to approach the phenomenon with our full attention and care.

Here we see another connection between phenomena and gifts: openness. The phenomenological reduction sounds like a negative operation, but it could be understood as entirely positive. Its “reduction” of conceptual baggage frees the phenomenon for us to experience in its nudity. When we are good phenomenologists we remain open to the phenomenon in itself. This resembles the gift event, in which we remain open to an encounter with the other that moves us to appreciation. The quality of being freely given and the notion of openness to appreciation both turn up in thinking about the gift event and the phenomenal experience. There certainly seems to be a similarity between gifts and phenomena that extends beyond a shallow relation of being things that are given. Could this be taken as far as suggesting phenomenal experiences are gift events? If the answer is yes, there must be some way in which we can give gifts to phenomena. What could this possibly mean?

A possible answer is that our mere attentiveness and openness to the phenomena is a sort of act of gratitude, a gift given to the phenomenon. When we encounter the sumptuous ale or the engaging painting we might feel called to attend to these phenomena, to give ourselves over to them by reducing our preconceptions and allowing the phenomena to appear to us as they are. We are called-to-give our attention and our care to the phenomenon and to be open to it. Such openness might itself be thought of as a gift to the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon gives indifferently to what apprehends it. It does not give because it is grateful to the other who in turn appreciates it, and so there is at the heart of phenomenal experience a difference from the gift event as explored in this essay. This does not mean phenomena cannot be understood as gifts, but it does mean that they, like childbirth and forgiveness, ought not to be taken as paradigmatic instances of the gift event. Yet, because our

gifts are dependent upon phenomena in order to occur, it is also the case that the phenomenal event is a condition of such gift-giving. As phenomenality, and indeed Being, *as such* is something that makes possible the gift event, it is something to which we must acknowledge an appreciation. We are grateful for the possibility of being grateful at all.

By adhering to phenomenology's ontological agnosticism, Marion is unable to delve more deeply into such questions. This is because, insofar as we are forced to analyze only particular phenomena, we are always relegated in a way to dealing with the ontic. This is the result of Marion's opinion of phenomenology as "first philosophy," as the philosophical method *par excellence*, an opinion he inherits from Husserl. So long as phenomenology is the primary mode of understanding the world, it is impossible to think further the question of gratitude for phenomenality or existence itself. It is no coincidence that Heidegger is perhaps more useful for thinking about the gift. Using the tools of phenomenology to assist him in his ontological questioning, his break from Husserl allowed him to inquire into questions of Being that Marion, as a loyal phenomenologist, cannot even ask. Indeed, his method makes possible an analysis of the givenness of Being itself.

#### **4.1 The Givenness of Being**

Heidegger's essay "On the Essence of Truth" develops a theory of truth that expands on his earlier insights in *Being and Time*. Of particular interest to this study are his notions of presentation and the open region. Prior to any notion of propositional truth, argues Heidegger, we must understand that such truth is possible only because beings are presented to us at all. We do not first exist, capable of forming propositions about beings, and *then* encounter beings. We

find ourselves amidst beings, making propositions about them, but always already aware of them.<sup>57</sup> This is related to the “manifestation” of his earlier essay “On the Essence of Ground;” both manifestation and presentation are what first allow things to become apparent to us and allow us to comport ourselves toward them. Unless we already find ourselves amidst other beings and with certain projects orienting our concerned comportment, we would be incapable of picking out and assigning predicates to beings at all.

Presentation and manifestation are both essentially ontic, in that they only reveal beings *as* beings. The phenomenological reduction is, in a sense, operating at much the same level. However, the reduction intends to expurgate any trace of our projects, so that we can see the phenomenon just as it presents itself to consciousness. This difference does not change the fact, though, that it is primarily interested in particular phenomena, not in their existence.

Heidegger wants to go further, insisting that ontic truth, such as presentation, requires a relationship to a kind of ontological truth. This presentation of things cannot also be what made possible our openness to things in general. As Heidegger had earlier talked about “unveiledness,” in “On the Essence of Truth” he now introduces the notion of the “open region.”<sup>58</sup> The sheer event by which beings become available for us to present requires a sort of ontological location, an open region in which we can be affected by things erupting into our notice and toward which we comport ourselves. All comportment takes place within such an open region, indeed is dependent upon the open region in order to be able to present things to itself with which it will be concerned. This openness to beings is not merely an ontical

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<sup>57</sup> Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth,” translated by John Sallis (*Basic Writings*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 121.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

openedness; indeed, what we are open to is precisely these beings in their Being. Our standing in the open region is the condition upon which we are able to apprehend the ontological difference, the difference between beings and the Being of beings. Our capacity of open comportment is not merely an ontical fact about us; it is an ontological condition in which we exist, as it is what makes possible our mode of concerned comportment with beings in the first place.

Phenomena, therefore, are not the end of the story. The open region in which phenomena come forth is primary, as it is the ontological possibility of phenomena in the first place. It is this capacity to think of ontological conditions that gives Heidegger's model the power to consider givenness *as* givenness. That we must do so at all might not be clear, but a careful consideration of the implications of the theory of the gift worked out earlier will reveal it is essential.

The cycle of giving and gratitude of the passionate gift event cannot be sustained by itself. As we are always drawn forth by grace to give, it is apparent that the cycle, as constituted by donor and donee, cannot itself include the initial gift event to which we are responding. If it were the case that there is nothing outside of donor and donee, there would never be a situation or ground upon which the gift event could take place. This is not to posit some divine source, only to note the obvious, that it is impossible for an act that is always a reaction (giving that is motivated by gratitude) to be its own origin. There is a similarity here with the cosmological argument. If everything is caused by some earlier thing, then there must be some original cause. However, unless we are willing to define an unmoved mover into existence, we must admit that any cause we posit as original must itself have a cause. Likewise with the gift event: if all gifts

are given in response to previous gift events, we must posit an original gift event. However, insofar as gift events operate by way of response, there can be no original gift event.

Are we now, at the end of this study, right back where we started, entangled in another aporia? Has my definition of gift events as responsive precluded the possibility of gift events at all? I do not think this is necessarily the case. Heidegger's power comes from his capacity to think of the ontological condition of givenness, the open region, in a way that has no reference to temporality. The open region is *ontologically* prior to the phenomenon, although it is not *temporally* prior. As ontological, the open region is where we become aware of Being, and because such an awareness of Being is part of our ontological structures, it is simply always already the case that we have an encounter with Being. The open region is what makes possible our encounters with phenomena and with others in general, and so is what makes possible appreciation, gratitude, giving, and everything else explored in this paper. Our ontological openness in a world that gives itself to us moves us to appreciation, in a way that avoids any problem of causation.

Insofar as we are always already the recipients of gifts we do not need to ponder a temporally originary gift event. As being-given is part of our ontological structures as human beings, we are always already recipients of gifts that move us to give gifts ourselves. There is a sense in which this commits us to an appreciation of Being itself, but this need not be understood as a gift event of the sort we have thus far discussed. This being-given would itself appear to be dependent upon phenomena, which is in turn dependent upon Being. However, as with phenomena, it is important to note that this does not mean that the givenness of Being is the paradigmatic gift event, as Being is given regardless of our behavior with regard to it.

Nevertheless, existence is a precondition of phenomenality, which is itself a precondition of gift-giving at all. The irruption of Being into the open region suffices to explain our capacity for openness that makes possible our being-given. This irruption of Being itself may or may not be a gift event, but if indeed it is a gift event it will clearly be drastically different from the gift event analyzed throughout the first three chapters of this essay. What such a gift event would be like is beyond the scope of this paper; all I wish to show is that there is a dependency upon Being that is present in every ordinary gift event, so that there is a sort of gratitude for Being that is presupposed by our recognition of gifts as good. Just as there is a call-to-appreciate emanating from phenomena themselves, there is a call-to-appreciate deriving from Being itself.

## CONCLUSION

This essay began with a simple definition of the gift as freely given and ended with an ontological claim that there is a calling-to-give that emanates from Being itself. While one may or may not agree that we can make the move from one to the other, it is clear at the very least that the notion of the gift is a philosophically fecund one. Why should this be so? This essay makes the case that gifts present problems for many commonly-held philosophical concepts. Ethical duty, for example, becomes quite complicated when it tries to encompass the gift. We saw in the section on Kant the way in which gifts demand to be taken seriously from a moral point of view but then resist all systematization. In the final section on phenomena we see that, whether phenomena are gifts or not, they share certain crucial characteristics with gifts that can prompt us to respond to phenomena as though they were gifts. And in the section on Levinas we witness the radicalization of the idea of the human subject until even my own self emerges as a gift that I myself receive.

Why is the gift such a powerful concept? Why is it that such a commonsense notion should complicate so many commonly understood notions as ethical duty, phenomenal experience, and the human subject? I think the reason is that being-given, as an ontological structure of humans, utterly permeates every experience we have of the world. That we are affective, passionate selves does not coincide neatly with any notion of the human “individual.” Hence, when an attempt is made to think about phenomenal experience in which the subject is deemed utterly independent of the experience, or to think about a duty to others in which the other is separated from me by a rift of obligation, the gift will begin to seem impossible.



In this paper I have demonstrated that the gift is im-possible only within a conceptual horizon that deems the human subject utterly individual. In the first chapter I showed why Derrida perceives an aporetic structure in the gift event when it is combined with the notion of the economic ego. The second chapter analyzes more closely why such an aporia arises in the philosophies of Kant and Levinas, but also discovers certain facts that suggest that the notion of the economic ego is what prevents the gift event from appearing as perfectly rational. These facts are primarily (a) that the gift is given *for* and *from* the other; and (b) that I am myself otherly. The third chapter is an account of what kind of subject these facts would lead to; namely, the passionate subject. The aporetic nature of the gift is then shown to be dissolved when the gift is thought of outside the horizontal limitations of the economic ego. Finally, the fourth chapter explores whether the gift event might be properly understood to extend to phenomena and Being itself. While neither phenomena nor Being is presented as being or not being gifts, certain similarities are examined. The conclusion drawn from these similarities is that while they may or may not be gifts, both phenomena and Being are conditions for the possibility of gifts, and so are features of the world that we are called to appreciate.

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## **VITA**

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