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The Gift and the Given

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The gift, according to ancient Seneca (1989) and modern Mauss (1990), is supposed to form the primary social bond. Here, especially for Mauss, generosity precedes contract. The latter may be necessary in order to protect, but it is not fundamental. Gift, rather, is what connects and unites.

And yet it has come to be that which we most disagree about, beginning with the question of 1: *gift and contract itself*.

Is gift always gift-exchange? In order to give, must one already be in a relationship, and if gift is socially fundamental, does that mean that gifts have always already been exchanged? But if gift in this way begins as a return gift and itself expects in return a counter-gift, then is not gift itself an exotic mode of contract? But can that be a true gift? Already Seneca (1989) asked whether there can be an aristocratic, pure, disinterested gift, giving for the sake of giving. In that case gift has more to do with absolute duty than with social bonds, with absolute ethical respect for the other, rather than with practices sustaining a specific community.

And so one gets the contrast between the pure, disinterested, unilateral gift on the one hand and the idea that any gift is always involved in the complex reciprocity of gift-exchange on the other. But then it has come to be asked 2: *Is the gift purely a social matter, or is it also ontological?*

In the case of the imperative to give freely and

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

This is a circumstance still perhaps reflected in our language, in which we speak of 'the given' to refer to the inertly factual, and yet with a language that paradoxically conveys the notion of a personal transfer. When theorists, in turn, have reflected in the 20th century on this circumstance, one gets 3: *The debate about the given and the gift*.

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

But nothing, it turned out, was given in this inert fashion. There was no inviolable empirical data uncontaminated by synthesis or interpretation or evaluation. To find anything uncontestedly given one had rather to turn to our entire existential circumstance. Here, 'it is given' that we are beings able to reflect on the fact that there is being at all. Here, our specific existence in time and space is also 'given' to us. Finally, things are only 'there' for us because they are able to appear to us in diverse and never exhaustive aspects, both

across space and through time. Things arrive to us via spatial journeyings and temporal advents. This may be the crucial reason why we can speak of the factual as the 'given' – in excess of ancestral habit. What is there arrives and is in this sense 'donated' – we naturally greet the budding tree and the new dawn with grateful welcome.

But what can this mean? Here, 4: *the analytic and the phenomenological approaches part company*.

For analysis, once the given has become a 'myth' and this is fully admitted, only the inanity of practice in order to be practical remains ('pragmatism'). For phenomenology, on the other hand, it may be that we can salvage the anti-metaphysics of remaining with the given by re-interpreting the given literally as gift (Levinas, 1991; Derrida, 1992; Blanchot, 1993; Marion, 1991). But does that mean that one turns at first to the rising dawn? No, because the phenomenological presumption of confinement to the given is that one remains with what appears within the realm of the thinking subject. If what is given within this appearance is fundamentally a gift, then this cannot be guaranteed by the of-limits 'transcendence' of thought-independent being, but only in terms of this subjective space itself.

Therefore, it must be this space, as such, and not what appears to it, that is a gift. The gift of the thinking subject to itself? But how could such self-reference be a gift, or indeed fully proven as given even to itself? Instead, the subject must be given to itself before itself by an other in a 'history' always older than itself (Levinas, 1991). No representation of an ineluctable given is required here, since the other is registered by my inescapable ethical response to her needy demand – a response which first of all ensures that I am 'there' at all.

But how can we know such an imperative without characterizing the suffering other? And how else, if this subject does not, as an ethical subject, 'appear' to me (as Levinas insists) except by projecting my own experience of what it is to exist, to feel and to know onto the other? Is not the 'given' Cartesian subject still secretly prior in this *schema* after all? But this sort of givenness is supposed to have lapsed, along with all the other mythically 'givens'.

Therefore, the priority of the ethical does not clearly work, and one is left with the question 5: *Is the gift/given first enacted ethically, or first known about theoretically?*

Instead of trying to save givenness as gift, could one not instead admit (now that the anti-metaphysical 20th century is over) that one has always already speculatively ('metaphysically') transgressed the boundary between the immanently appearing and the excess of non-appearing

in the real? If, as Marion (2002) says, the typical phenomenon is 'saturated' in terms of an appearing that exceeds our full conceptual grasp, then does not this mean (beyond Marion, 2003) that we receive such an appearing also with the supplement of our poetic, constructive speculation concerning the hidden – else the non-appearing excess will be merely a sublime hyper-presence without character, neatly segmented from that which does definably appear? And an uncharacterizable hyper-presence might be menace as much as it is gift.

This consideration, of course, tends to return us to the issue of language and interpretation. But it also brings us back to the arriving dawn and the budding tree. For now it is possible that things as well as persons can be initially conceived as gifts. Already, Heidegger (1972) suggested that *es gibt* was the deeper name for being. So, 6: *Can one substitute the gift for the given in ontological terms, instead of reading the given as the gift in phenomenological terms?*

Yet to read being as time necessarily but tragically interrupted by presence (Heidegger, 1972) is to ensure that the gift is still an impersonal given and, moreover, that it is perpetual mutual sacrifice (of Being to beings and vice-versa) rather than gift-exchange. In addition, to claim that this is a true phenomenological reduction is still, after all, to locate the gift in the supposedly given.

Is another ontological strategy possible? Supposing that I am myself, really, ontologically a gift? Then one does not immediately need to invoke the other in order to grant oneself this status. If mind or spirit is more than an illusory epiphenomenon, then it does not derive from matter, and must be in consequence a mysterious and fundamental gift from the unknown (Bruaire, 1983). If I am myself a gift, then what lurks in me from before myself is more than the human, horizontal other. It is rather the trace of a vertical donor. And it seems appropriate that this donor, 'God', who gives gifts to nothing, and so gives gifts to themselves in order to establish gifts, should create first of all a creature able reflexively to exist by giving this gift to herself in turn. Is this not what it means to think (Bruaire, 1983)? Then gratitude for the gift of self spills later over into generosity towards the neighbour in imitation of that generosity that has first constituted us in being at all.

But if spirit is appropriately the first given, is it absolutely the first given? Is this not rather being in general, and does not this then allow that 'I' am first co-given along with others? And what of the role of merely material things? Are they not also first given? And do they not ensure that there can be between people a concrete shared community,

rather than mere mutual sympathy and respect at a safe distance?

This raises 7: *The question of whether our approach to the gift should be primarily philosophical or else primarily ethnographical.* Or, in other terms, can we define the gift most securely as an eidetic possibility (within phenomenology) or as an ontological pre-condition of finite existence (Bruaire's metaphysics), or must we rather discover it from the complex actuality of historical practice? A phenomenology combined with an ontology of the gift (Merleau-Ponty, 1968) might perhaps conclude that gift is interpersonal, that to give one must already be responding and must already be in a relation of exchange to the proposed recipient. Moreover, it might also conclude that a gift, if it is to be accounted a gift, must be an appropriate gift – therefore the complex business of combining thing with person ('finding the right gift') is essential and not dispensable. Such a perspective suggests that gift is always a moment within gift-exchange.

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

One can see, then, in abstract formal terms, the possibility of an exchange that still sustains gift. It would be less a circle than an ongoing never foreclosed spiral (Godbout and Caillé, 1998). But to know if this apparent possibility can really be instantiated, one has to regard and judge historical actions – both on a micro and a macro scale. At this stage historical ethnography becomes essential. But within ethnography, as much as within philosophy, the question has been asked 8: *Is the gift unilateral or is it reciprocal?*

Many anthropologists have seen in gift only disguised contract, and have assumed in effect the modern division between reciprocal contract and unilateral gift. Especially they have suggested that a gift is only a kind of loan secured by capitalized, ungiftable items (Godelier, 1999; Weiner, 1992). But could it be that the ungiftable and that which

must be given are two halves of the same unmodern picture? Namely, that, in ancient times, objects were not yet commodities, and so were seen as specific things with specific characteristics liable to achieve specific but not quite predictable effects. Able, in fact, to move the human plot almost as much as persons do. Then the ungiftable belongs to the person it defines, while its surrogates must return or return in some equivalent mode, because they must always *remain him* in some sense. Gift-exchange is possible in part because of a certain belief in the animation of objects (Godbout and Caillé, 1998). This is the question 9: *of the spirit of the gift.*

But beyond this discussion one can ask 10: *Is the unilateral/reciprocal contrast absolute?*

Perhaps both paradigms assume that a situation of equality between social parties is the norm. But is there not rather usually hierarchy? Or always at least temporary hierarchy in that one person talks – gives orders, reports etc. – and is thus superior for the moment, or else one person listens – and judges – and is so likewise thereby superior? The person who talks both gives in a one-way sense and creates the theme and space of a subsequent conversation. In a sense he (somewhat) unilaterally gives the space of future reciprocity. Thus unilaterality and reciprocity can operate simultaneously, yet at different levels of causality. Supremely, one could note, God unilaterally gives a creature whose whole existence must be response to him. It is, indeed, this interaction of two causal levels that helps to sustain the neverforeclosed spiral of gift-exchange.

But to speak of spoken sign as gift – what does this mean? If a gift is a signifying convention then is it at bottom a fiction? Is the impossibility of the pure gift according to Derrida (because we award ourselves economically even in telling ourselves that we have been generous) coterminous with the endless deferral of meaning by the sign, such that to speak is to endlessly project the arrival of meaning, while to act ethically is endlessly to strive towards a generosity that cannot be enacted? This implies, however, as Derrida was aware, that postponement of meaning nonetheless remains 'truer' than a foreclosed presence of truth, while equally the impossible gift remains 'the good' in a way that economic and contractual self-assurance cannot be. So 11: *What is the co-implication between gift and fiction?*

Is meaning just postponed? Or can it be in some measure anticipated? And if not, then is the gift basically a sign, a promise of special attention that can never be realized? But perhaps, to the contrary, a sign has always a material vehicle, like the person speaking, the medium in which it is inscribed, the actions, place and time that

accompany it. This vehicle itself supplements the import of the sign, and not just the next sign to which it gives rise. This ensures that *some* meaning is already realized. Is this meaning a suppression of indeterminacy, or does it of itself open up a specific but open horizon of meaning? If it does not, then the significance of the material for meaning seems to be suppressed, by arbitrary *fiat*.

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

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

So, finally, 12: *Is the gift the echo of divine creation and of divine grace? And otherwise, is it an illusion?*

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