

Gift and Economy

Thank you for your generous
contribution to the
development of the
book. I hope you will
enjoy reading it as much
as I have enjoyed writing
it. Yours truly,
Eric R. Severson

Gift and Economy: Ethics, Hospitality and the Market

Edited by

Eric R. Severson

CAMBRIDGE
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(Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, 243). But I would say instead that we only "return" to God *in Christ* who is, as Loughlin himself has argued, both the gift and the giver (God). So there is still no exchange. Loughlin does say "it becomes difficult to maintain the distinction between exchange and gift ... For what is given is the return or exchange, if 'exchange' has meaning here" (244).

CHAPTER SIX

THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE GIFT: A DIALOGUE

RICHARD KEARNEY AND ERIC R. SEVERSON

Severson: Thank you so much for participating in this volume. You have been an integral part of the philosophical development of the concept of the gift over the last twenty years, and your contributions add much to both this book and its aims. You have been unrelenting in your exploration of the concept of the gift, with numerous references in your most recent book, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*.

My first questions have to do with the history of the concept, especially in as much as the gift has come to play an important role in the discourses of continental philosophy. You were there as it began and have contributed continuously to this concept and the role that it has played. So what is your recollection of the arrival of the gift as a principle question of continental philosophy?

Kearney: Well I think it begins, actually, with anthropology and specifically French anthropology. Émile Benveniste, in his groundbreaking book *Indo-European Language and Society*, points out an intriguing ambiguity in the origins of the word for gift. In his chapter on "Gift and Exchange" Benveniste demonstrates a possible duplicity in the Indo-European word for gift, which sometimes doubles as the word for poison.¹ This connection between gift and poison fascinated Jacques Derrida, demonstrating for him the inevitability of debt and obligation inherent in every act of giving. There are repercussions to giving a gift, which binds the person who receives. To receive a gift is therefore to carry debt, which can be a poison because debt renders one obligated and even inferior.

So this concept makes its way into philosophy first from sociological and anthropological investigations that were underway in the early

twentieth century. Certainly a principle contribution to this investigation is Marcel Mauss's book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*.² Mauss analyzes with extraordinary detail, the economic implications of the gift. Mauss's assessment is not entirely negative; he thinks of the economy of exchange in at least two distinct senses. First, there is sort of a generous economy that goes back to these archaic societies. In such instances, the giving of the gift, though certainly connected to power structures and hierarchy, is nevertheless still an excessive expenditure of generosity. Even though the gift of the famous *potlach* practice of excessive giving is free from, and perhaps prior to, purely economic monetary exchanges, there are still certain strings attached. There is no such thing as a pure gift.

So no matter how generous the gift, it always participates in structures of power. While the gift is not an exact equivalence to wealth, it has power nonetheless. And that power is the power of fortuity of expenditure. Mauss cites how some gifts are destroyed to demonstrate that recipients are above keeping things. Yet even the destruction of the gift, in lavish ceremonies of surplus and excess, only underscores the hierarchical dynamics of giving. The greater the gift, or the more profound the obligation to receive, the more obvious it becomes that gift and economy are impossible to disentangle. It is a matter ultimately of hostility (you do not give or receive) or hospitality (you give and receive and give again without limit). Mauss points out that this is a way of making sure that gifts circulate within a society and between societies. And this creates what Levi-Strauss, following Mauss, identifies as a movement from endogamy to exogamy.³ A bond is created between the giver and the receiver, between the community, tribes or chieftains who pass gifts between them. Now Levi-Strauss expands upon that and says that passing women between the tribes is also a movement away from endogamy to exogamy – a going out toward the other, the neighbor, the foreigner beyond the fortress family, beyond incestuous closure.

The second way of giving is more obviously sinister, and Mauss outlines many instances of this manipulative giving, which is intentionally designed to invoke debt and act oppressively. By differentiating between only generous and oppressive giving, Mauss implies that all gifts are subject to the rules of economy. Mauss leaves us with a way of talking about the exploitive nature of giving, whether it appears as an unintentional byproduct of generosity or an intentional tool of manipulation and control. But either way, there is no entirely free gift.

S: In this second form of giving there is a violence that is scarcely veiled, but it gives *giving* a bad name.

K: There is a tension between, on the one hand, a moral notion of the gift economy, which is in fact peace over war, and manipulative giving, which is in fact fighting the other, you *give* to the other, you kill out of kindness. You can see why Mauss's book is a source text that continues to generate philosophical and ethical interest.

S: Can you outline the progression between this anthropological and sociological discussion and the one that consumed so much philosophical attention in the last three decades?

K: We can surely give Derrida considerable credit for this rise to prominence of the gift in philosophy. His books *Given Time* and *The Gift of Death* were landmark contributions. Paul Ricoeur also added to the discussions in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* also made an impact at a more interdisciplinary and broadly cultural level. The debate over the possibility of a pure gift reaches even clearer articulation in the extensive discussions between Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, author of *Being Given* and *Reduction and Giving*.

S: You yourself were no small part of that conversation, particularly in moderating the Derrida-Marion dialogue at the Villanova conference in 2001.⁴ Why do you think discussions of the gift so quickly turn in explicitly in theological directions?

K: I think the gift becomes particularly interesting as philosophy turns with new regard to the religious. The return of the mystical is one product of the rebellion against metaphysics. Questions about the possibility and dynamics of the gift are, in a sense, challenges to metaphysics, to the supposition that metaphysics is Sufficient Reason, and Sufficient Reason is a final form. If reducible to pure economics, then the gift is mere cause and effect. But if there is something more at work in the gift, then there is something outside of causality, something unprecedented and about which metaphysics is ill suited to speak. Discussions of the gift are a part of the move beyond metaphysics, and even a move beyond modern idealism and existentialism. At stake here is also the role of the subject in modern philosophy. The modern metaphysics of subjectivity – whether in Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Husserl, or Sartre – is understood as sovereign cogito or

transcendental ego. In each case this ego is the master and possessor of nature. So I think with the breakdown of the modern transcendental self, and the consequent de-centering of the ego as master, there is an openness to the gift.

S: There are so many responses to the breakdown of the subject as philosophy's center. And this helps explain the diverse approaches to the gift in contemporary philosophy.

K: Exactly. Structuralism appears to have no place for real generosity. The idea of a personal giving or gift is out of court. Even for Levi-Strauss the act of giving is a mechanism of exchange rather than an interruption of economy. Derrida's interest is in part a critical response to the role of the ego in structuralism. The gift therefore becomes an important question and puzzle for deconstruction. Similar responses can be seen in Levinas, who responds quite directly to the dominance of the ego in modern philosophy; Levinas's ethics announce the other as epiphany, as abundant gift. In Marion's radical mystical phenomenology, which is really a form of mystical theology, the gift becomes central to understanding the revelation and saturation of a phenomenon. In Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of oneself-as-another, the appearance of the other person presents a critical question. How does the other manifest herself to us? This crucial question can be addressed by way of the gift, though this can be interpreted in two different ways. The other as gift can be a kind of invasion, violation, persecution; you'll find all that in Levinas's understanding of the trauma and obsession of the encounter with the other. The appearance of the other is in an unusual sense a gift, for the other may be a source of violence and violation. The second form of the other as gift involves a certain fortuity, graciousness and generosity. If you are doing a course on the phenomenology of the gift most people don't think so much about the gift as poison, but that's there. There cannot be a complete innocence; there is a complexity and deep ambivalence to the gift.

S: There are multiple models for the gift, and it seems there are philosophical sponsors behind each way of rendering this deceptively complex concept.

K: As I understand it, there are three models of the gift. There is a primary model of what we can call the economic model; this seems to be fairly straightforward, referring to an exchange that knowingly creates credits and debits. Giver, gift, givee are in a circle, and Derrida gives a perfect

account of that in the first chapter of *Given Time*.⁵ And then, there is what I would call the deconstructive model of the gift, which is to some extent also mystical, where there is a radical evacuation of the subject vis-à-vis this incoming gift. This is what Derrida calls pure hospitality and pure gift (if there is such a thing). And finally there is the hermeneutical model of the gift which is somewhere between the economic and the non-economic, between construct and deconstruction, between Levi-Strauss and Derrida. And that is where I would situate the kind of work that I am trying to do. Such a hermeneutics of the gift acknowledges a certain reconnaissance, a certain reciprocity, a certain recognition. I do not think the gift and the givee have to disappear for the event of a gift to occur, as they do for Derrida and Marion. But in the receiving and the giving of the gift, there is more than money involved, there is more than a mercantile exchange, there is more than a power leverage. My interest is in that excess, that which is more than pure exchange but still involves a relationship of recognition between giver and receiver. So the hermeneutic problem of what Ricoeur calls "le parcours de la reconnaissance" is very important to me. It is a problem that remains interpersonal, and I think it addresses something lacking in the treatments of the "impossible gift" in Derrida, Levinas and Marion. When the gift is purely unconditional, because it is so absolute and anonymous, it is beyond any sort of diacritical hermeneutics. And in that sense we are not sure what we are getting and we have no real right to ask. Dia-critical discernment is impossible.⁶

S: Kierkegaard plays an interesting role in your recent discussions along these lines. Can you summarize your objection to Derrida's discussion of Kierkegaard in *The Gift of Death*?

K: I object to the celebration of faith as utterly blind. For Derrida you read blind, you receive blind. Abraham is engaged in a form of "holy madness." To me that's just too blind, too mad. I argue that between the unconditional gift and the purely conditional gift, there is some kind of hermeneutical space. So in relation to Isaac I see it as a diacritical hermeneutic process. Abraham is dealing with these distinctive voices that are coming to him from beyond, from another. They are challenging him and all his assumptions, presuppositions and possessions, including his son Isaac. He cannot be certain whose voice it really is that is coming to him. The voice claims to be God's, and then it commands two things: first it commands that he kill, and then it commands that he not kill but preserve life. I see Abraham as reading that situation not just blindly, and not just intellectually either, but in a carnal sense; he reads in fear and

trembling. But in his fear and trembling there is also pondering, discernment, dia-critical interpretation as an embodied pre-understanding. He hears between the voices, he reads between the lines, and chooses accordingly, responsibly, in critical response to the double call, between life and death.

Abraham ultimately chooses - and this is the greatness of Abraham - not to kill his son, but neither to hang onto the boy as his own. He neither conserves him as his own nor kills him for God. He actually goes beyond both options and listens, you might say to a third voice, which invites Abraham to have life, not the life he might give himself, but the life that God gives. So in a way, Abraham realizes that in order to give life back to his son, he must give his son and then receive his son back as a gift. This involves a "gift of death" as Abraham must put to death his own ego, his own past and his own future - the future he would take as his own. But he does not give the "gift of death" to Isaac. Abraham dies to himself, and his death does become a sort of gift that allows him to receive the gift of life and give it, in turn, to Isaac.

S: You return to the Abraham and Isaac narrative several times in *Anatheism*, and each time I find myself wondering a similar question which relates to the nature of the gift. The story from Mount Moriah is highlighted in Derrida, who takes this direction from Kierkegaard. In *Fear and Trembling*, written under the pseudonym Johannes do Silentio, Kierkegaard takes the posture of awe and reverence. Johannes cannot understand Abraham, but only marvels at Abraham's remarkable decision and disposition. It is not the resignation of Abraham that mesmerizes Johannes; he can understand resignation and sacrifice. The resignation of Abraham to Isaac's death would be final, not leaving any opening for receiving the gift of Isaac's return. So Johannes opens *Fear and Trembling* with a series of alternative endings. In each of these narratives Abraham responds differently to the call of God, and in each case more reasonably. He ignores the call, plunges the knife into his own chest, makes himself a monster to protect Isaac's faith, etc. In each alternative ending Abraham sacrifices, renounces, becomes the Knight of Resignation. And each of these ways of giving appears to be economic. They are calculated sacrifices, gifts directed at a future purpose.

So I am wondering if the event on Moriah must be attuned to the "gift" - to the excess you spoke about a moment ago - and if you think Kierkegaard writes *Fear and Trembling* to play with the fact that only the miracle of a gift can make sense of this event?

K: Well, I think otherwise the gift would look predictable and it would be already too confined to a system of checks and balances, of debit and credit. Where credit - strategic faith - becomes a question of debt. You can find that in Marion - a gift is still a debt and repayment, satisfaction of debt. What I find interesting is what Abraham is giving up. Giving up does not mean giving up to death, in terms of giving the other up to death. It means giving oneself up to death, which is a letting go of everything, including the beloved. Isaac is dearer to Abraham than his own life. But the life that Abraham receives back in Isaac is much more than any life he could give. So the other, God in this instance, gives life to Isaac and gives life back, by implication, to Abraham in a way that he cannot predict. So there is a radical risk and therefore a wager that this God who you give yourself up to is in fact a God who will bring you greater life; but there is no way of calculating that, there is no guarantee. There is a promise, but the promise comes from a voice outside of the economic system. So that's why I end *Anatheism* by saying: "For in surrendering our own God to a stranger God no God may come back again. Or the God who comes back may come back in ways that surprise us."⁷

This is already a kind of inter-religious dialogue; Abraham himself is moving from a notion of God that he thinks he knows, a tribal God of expiatory sacrifice and death, to another God, a God-after-God. And this movement takes him beyond the economy of sacrifice. We all possess the greatest possibility of receiving our own God back, but this time as a gift from the other, the God of life beyond death. Ana-theism is God's return as gift. Abraham receives his Yahweh back, but in a way that Yahweh had never before revealed. This means Abraham's God after Moriah is *new*, a God that was received only through Abraham's willingness to give up God. So Abraham does not necessarily understand this God that is coming back. And the whole event requires tremendous risk and wager: we must be willing to *lose* faith in God as the very condition for God's advent. In surrendering our God to a stranger God, no God may come back to us, or the God who comes back to me may come back in a way that surprises us. Here I am with Kierkegaard; for Abraham to receive Isaac back is a break with any economic understanding of this event. But it is not, as Derrida would have it, a pure blindness. Some kind of diacritical hermeneutics is necessary, which is neither blind nor all seeing. Hermeneutics must operate in this twilight. Half-dark, half-light. I imagine it as dawn or dusk at Mount Moriah, likewise in Bethlehem, likewise in Mohammed's cave. The gift comes in twilight because we cannot know exactly what is coming. So we hope and pray and trust that it is good.

S: What marks these breaks in economy that are instances of the gift? Johannes writes *Fear and Trembling* as one who respects Abraham but does not understand the gift that leaves him awestruck. The piece that is missing, which keeps the gift from being describable, is also that which is most interesting about the gift. For Derrida it is a mystery of time and impossibility. And he is fierce to guard the impossibility of the gift for the sake of the gift, which once it becomes lashed to the possible is no more the gift. How does the excess you speak of relate to Derrida's "impossible" gift?

K: I always argue for the *possibility* within impossibility. This is already a question of language. In light of Derrida's claims we could justifiably stop short of exploring the possible impossibility of the gift. In a way, Kierkegaard, Derrida and Marion are all engaged in a certain kind of contradiction because what they are talking about can't be talked about. Silence would be the appropriate response but silence is not observed - they all write! They all speak the unspeakable! Kierkegaard positions Johannes de Silentio as a voice trying to speak about what cannot be spoken. If one takes Kierkegaard completely seriously on this point there would be no Bible, because we would not know the story. There would be no existentialism because Kierkegaard himself could not have written what he wrote. Continental philosophy depends on this choice to speak despite the legitimate appeal of silence. Heidegger spoke about Being; Levinas spoke about the Other; Derrida spoke about the Messianic; Marion and Caputo (and myself) speak about the God beyond God. So the performative contradiction is what I find interesting, but inconsistent, about continental philosophy. Analytic philosophy is totally consistent. As Wittgenstein says: "whereof you cannot speak thereof you must be silent." This silence was the "mystical" in which he included the religious. He kept his word. Continental philosophers do not. They put silence into words, for good or ill. That is for readers to decide.

S: And analytic philosophy is typically less interested in the gift, at least as that which exceeds the closed system of exchange.

K: Right. Derrida's performative contradiction is interesting. Because on one note he is with Wittgenstein in attempting to stay silent about that which cannot be said. But then Derrida seems to sense that Kierkegaard is right; and though silence is the appropriate response, he is going to contradict himself by speaking nonetheless. Here we find Derrida using the modes of poetry and mysticism as tools to deconstruct language. I find

this method infuriating, but tantalizingly fascinating at the same time. He is trying to be loyal to silence by speaking in an almost unspeakable way, and by thinking in an almost unthinkable way. So I admire his fidelity to that kind of contradiction. Sometimes Derrida, and also Levinas, are virtually impossible to read. My instinct is always to try and say things clearly, but I can see a reverence in the way Derrida and Levinas write. They are trying to protect something that language and speech inevitably threaten or betray. I think Levinas and Derrida both demonstrate their desire to be clear in their interviews. They are willing to say in conversation, in the realm of the interpersonal, what they hesitate to put in writing. In Derrida, there is a constant dancing around the subject at hand. I think that's where hermeneutics can intervene. It introduces a certain choreography.

S: I would like to pose a question about language and the gift. There are obviously different modes of speech, and you have mentioned at times a mystical inflection to Derrida's speech. I am wondering if there is a more overtly theological mode of speech, namely the mode of liturgy, that might help us speak about the unspeakability of the gift. I think this approach to the gift, and to phenomena in general, appear in Marion's *God Without Being*. Yet after that volume Marion takes a turn towards more technical phenomenology, and he begins to tighten his language about the gift, especially in his more explicit treatment of the gift like *Being Given*. Marion is less interested in the theological intonation of *God Without Being*, where I think gift and the Eucharist are closely aligned. Liturgy allows for waiting, for hopeful expectation, and perhaps an awareness that what matters is precisely that which language fails to catch. I wonder if the language of liturgy isn't another option in this dialogue about the gift.

K: You mean other than the economic, deconstructive, and hermeneutic models?

S: Well, I am not sure that the liturgical is not also hermeneutical, but it performs hermeneutics with the kind of humility and openness that one must take to the elements of the Eucharistic table. The excess is instantly appreciated and respected and left without the domestication that phenomenological language might attempt. I am wondering what you think of the liturgical intonation?

K: I like it a lot. That brings me to *perichoresis* as well. Because it is a poetics of the sacred, and liturgy is a poetic language. What does *liturgie* mean again?

S: "Work of the people."

K: Yes. Liturgy is an act, it is an enacting, an active *poiesis*, it is a making, a working. So I like the idea of a poetic liturgy. You know, I think most of our Christian liturgies are really dead. There are exceptions, of course, but I feel that Christian churches today have abandoned this sense of poetry in worship. Liturgies have to be constantly reinvented, re-choreographed. But a liturgical poetics is one that goes beyond theoretical understanding. I gravitate toward the Oriental concept of *perichoresis*, which invokes a deeply liturgical image of divine poetics and ongoing creativity. It is the liturgical poetics of a Triune dance. This dance moves around the *khora*, and so it is for me an eschatological conversion of Derrida's deconstructive *khora*. This liturgical *khora* is interpersonal, giving a face back to *khora*. This *khora* is the empty space, the receptacle, the matrix. It is the feminine as well, to go back to Plato's *Timaeus*.

I read *khora* to be the empty space within the eschatological Trinity that retrieves and repeats in an *ana-* form, the role of Sarah. When she receives news of the child from the three strangers she is inaugurating and prefiguring the *perichoretic* Trinity. There are three angels under the tree, and the bowl of the chalice, which is the *khora* of Sarah's womb, and Mary's womb functions similarly in the Christian narrative. Sarah and Abraham receive the strangers and a child is born, the impossible is made possible. These images reappear wonderfully in art and poetry across the centuries. Many representations from the Renaissance of Mary's annunciation depict the Father, Son and Holy Spirit participating in the dance around the empty centre – each taking their distance as they move endlessly toward and away from each other, ceding their place to the other, saying: 'after you, after you, after you...' That is the *ana-God*, the god after god after god. *Khora* is the womb that receives this gift, it is nexus of generation and regeneration at the heart of the Trinity.

Perichoresis is also interpersonal, I suggest, as it opens the hospitality of the Triune *khora* to the other person, creating a place for the other. *Perichoresis* is the endless gifting of one's place to the other and receiving a place from the other. So the question is: is this giving and receiving an essentially divine economy? I would want to say that it is certainly more than a mercantile or even Maussian economy; there is something gratuitous and gracious at work here. Yet there is nothing necessary about

this, there is no guaranteed equality or reciprocity, no credit or debit, no hierarchy of power or privilege, and certainly no fusion into equivalence or sameness. This is the risk at the heart of the *eschaton* that I find is sustained by the *khora*. Abraham and Sarah could have said no to the stranger in the desert, Mary could have said no to the stranger in Nazareth. And each one of us we can say no or yes in each moment of our lives, keeping the perichoretic circle in constant motion.

S: So each movement is seen as a surprise, a unique gift. It's not expectation, it's not reciprocity, it's not what I'm owed.

K: For me, *khora* is actually humanity, it is Mary and Sarah, it is the greatness of humanity, and it is time and space, or what Derrida might call "timing" and "spacing." That allows for an eschatological deferral. Levinas once said to me: "Surely, Richard, your eschatological God is just a deferred presence: when you get to your eschaton everything will be fully present and fulfilled, happy ever after." But no, I replied, the *khora* at the heart of divinity is the empty space: the gap of the womb of perichoresis continues in the eschaton. I like to link this to an idea suggested by Nicholas of Cusa, who refuses to allow being and presence (*esse*) to ever triumph over possibility (*posse*), even in the eschaton. I see the *perichoresis* as a liturgical poetics where the *posse* of desire and movement is never exhausted or ended.

S: Looking to the future, it seems to me that continental philosophy is not done thinking about the gift. You are still providing energy to the question, and I'm wondering about your assessment: Is there work still to be done on the gift?

K: Certainly! There is a momentum to this question that brings it back around again and again. We move forward from Mauss to Derrida and Marion. But it is not the case that we will not return to Mauss. There is something in Mauss that I think is proto-eschatological. There is something about giving fortuitously that exceeds the mere expressions of power, wealth, prestige and hierarchy. And I find that Lewis Hyde's reading of Mauss is very interesting in this regard. Hyde sees in Mauss the prefiguring of the circle of the gift in art. The creativity of art is a way of passing on the gift. And Hyde actually links this up with mysticism too, looking to Meister Eckhart, for example. Hyde writes: "for Eckhart we are not really alive until we have borne the gift back into the Godhead."⁸ So the gift is a double birthing: I am the recipient of birth and

the one who gives birth, I am the receiver and the giver, but it is something that doesn't end. And because the question of the gift includes the *khora* at the heart of the *eschaton*, it seems like a truly fruitful question for philosophy and its boundary limit – theology.

Notes

- ¹ Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).
- ² Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London, Routledge, 2002).
- ³ Claude Levi-Strauss, "Endogamy and Exogamy," in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 42-51.
- ⁴ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, ed., "On the Gift," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- ⁵ Jacques Derrida, "The Time of the King," in *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1-33.
- ⁶ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003). Also, Leonard Lawlor and Cynthia Willett, eds. "Diacritical and Radical Hermeneutics." *Philosophy Today* Vol 55 (Fall 2011).
- ⁷ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 181.
- ⁸ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2007), 70.

PART II: ECONOMY AND POWER