

# Thesis

UNWRAPPING THE GIFT: EMPTY NOTION OR VALUABLE CONCEPT?

Submitted By

Jonathon Emil Polce SJ

Junior Member in Philosophy

In partial fulfilment of the requirements

For the Degree of: Masters of Arts in Philosophy

Institute of Christian Studies

Toronto, Ontario

May 18<sup>th</sup> 2016

Master's Committee

Advisor: Robert Sweetman

Chair: Nik Ansell

John Caruana

James Olthius

### **Dedication of Special Thanks**

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my friends and colleagues at the Institute of Christian Studies and at Regis College in Toronto. In particular, special thanks are in order to Eric M., Josh H., Michael R., Matt T., Fr. Michael E., Jeremy W., Kevin C., and Sean M. whose friendship, fruitful conversations, encouragements, and helpful corrections initiated and sustained me during my Master's program. Also a deep note of thanks to Kenneth Schmitz whose writings on the gift opened my eyes to the philosophical richness of gratitude and giftedness. My discovery of Pr. Schmitz would not have happened without the friendship of his family Lucelle S, and Michael S.

I would be remiss to not single out my advisor – Dr. Robert Sweetman – whose kind care, attention and supervision helped steer me along new and untraveled intellectual roads. Without the gift of his friendship and wisdom this paper would have never happened. His knowledge and his ability in the craft of teaching imbibe a spirit of excellence and gratitude I aspire to embody. He constantly fished me out of the ‘giggly weeds,’ and was a constant voice of encouragement and guidance – I could not imagine a better advisor and intellectual mentor.

I deep note of gratitude to my Jesuit brothers and mentors. In particular, to Kevin K., and Fr. Gilles M., who encouraged me to take up this project. To Chris F., Carlos C., Br. Gerry F., Matt H., Fr. Greg C., and Fr. Lloyd B., whose fraternal charity and friendship helped me stay grounded and centered in the Lord with laughs and good conversation. To St. Ignatius whose writings and life first opened my eyes to the centrality of gratitude in the Christian life and was the initial spark to pursue a topic on gratitude.

I offer a profound tribute of thanks to my family. Firstly, a note of thanks to my parents, Karen P. and Stephen P., who gave me the gift of life and who have continued to nurture this gift throughout my life. Without them I would not be here today. They were the first to teach me about giftedness and gratitude and much of my thoughts, on an experiential level, are grounded in their example. To my sister Kerri P. and the gift of her editing prowess and to my other siblings, Nick P. Alycia N., and Ben P. whose constant encouragement and friendship were sources of strength to finish strong.

In conclusion, all my thanks is ultimately directed to God the Father, Jesus the Son and to God the Holy Spirit. In writing upon gratitude and existence, I have become ever more humbled and grateful for the gift of my existence and the constant sustaining creative act of love by which I and all else is offered the gift of life by God. All good things in my life have come from so good a God – life, family, my talents and gifts, friendships and my vocation. I pray that with God's grace I may live my life only in the praise reverence and service of God our Lord. God's two greatest gifts to me have been my life and my salvation. In light of such great gifts my heart is moved to gratitude. I pray that my actions may flow from this gratitude back toward their Source.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Impossible Gift?.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Chapter 2 A Different Road to the Gift.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Gifted Existence?.....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Sketching a Response and Solidifying an Answer.....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>106</b>

## Introduction

Etienne Gilson in his text *'Being and Some Philosopher's'* argues that philosophers are constantly losing a most precious aspect of reality and philosophical thought: existence. Losing, perhaps conjures up the image of a frantic search for car keys, or more coyly, the hide and seek game with a friend. Forgetting might be a better image: in the sense of how we forget about the presence of air. Air is something we need and it exists all around us, but seldom do we give a conscious thought to it – until it is gone that is. Once air is absent, it becomes the most important thing in the world. There is another nuanced sense of forgetting that results from ignorance or devaluation: when a thing is noticed, but not recognized for the value that it possesses and is ignored and thus forgotten. Gilson thinks that existence has undergone variations of all these misfortunes throughout the history of philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

In his telling, some thinkers have tended to notice existence, as if it had an accidental role within being. Thus, they have put it aside as uninteresting philosophically. They regard it as a brute fact, or a given starting point, that which is taken for granted in order to go on to investigate something of greater interest (like an axiom in mathematics). When existence is seen as accidental, the possible or essential is seen as what is really real. What is possible and essential are matters of abstraction, thus abstraction or thought come to be seen as that which is most important. There is bifurcation between the world of existing things – which are accidental and transient – and the world of abstraction which is real and permanent. Such existentially

---

<sup>1</sup>Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 6. Gilson's whole book is an examination of the question "what happens to the notion of being when actual existence is removed from its comprehension?" In other words, what happens when 'being' is considered primarily as a noun and not as a verb? To forget the 'to be' within being, is for Gilson, to forget existence and to adhere to an existentially neutral philosophy. Examples of such a position for Gilson would be Francis Suarez, and a thinker who followed in his footsteps, Christian Wolff. Wolff held that the root of being is possibility. Existence has a role within being, but it is an accidental role at best. Thus metaphysics (or ontology), studies being *qua* being, but for Wolff this primarily means being as possible or potential. Philosophy thus conceived is primarily concerned with what is possible not with what is actual and thus turns its back on the actually existing world (109-118).

neutral systems of thought – having deprived themselves of existence – slowly become lifeless for lack of existential movement or air. Philosophy withdraws from reality, for its focus is on the possible not the actual.

Gilson sees other thinkers, fed up with abstraction and philosophy that forgets what is actual in deference to what is possible. They prize existence exclusively. What is real, important and knowable is existence. Yet existence can never be abstracted, or universalized, otherwise it would cease being actual and become possible, thus the only knowable and real existence is *my* existence. “The only reality which an existing being can know is its own” if it is to remain in the real and not get lost in the possible and the unreal.<sup>2</sup> Such a subjective valuing of existence risks locking one within a stifling immanence. Existence is so great, powerful, and exhaustive, that its meaning is lost in its vastness. Existence becomes a crushing flood, like water beyond a certain depth. Essentialist systems without existence are suffocating for lack of existential air; and existentially saturated systems that lack some determinate meaning through essence, become, isolating, unbearable, despairing. Gilson weaves a narrative of the history of philosophy that tries to reveal the dangerous poles that thought can tend towards when existence is either ignored, devalued, considered as a brute fact, or when determinate meaning is denied it so that it becomes overwhelming.

Gilson, however, did not think these were the only two ways to deal philosophically with existence: as accidental or as exclusive. He thought that there were some philosophers who were

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 149. An example of such a thinker, for Gilson, is Kierkegaard. The existentialist realizes that existence, as actual, forms a rupture in being understood as that which is possible. Yet man himself is a “co-presence...of both thought and of existence” (150). As such man is a mix of what is actual and what is possible. He can only grasp things through thought – and thus only know things as possible. He is both totally alive and totally alone. Thus he is left as an immanence that is isolating and meaningless – or if it has meaning it is only a self-constructed (referential) meaning. As Gilson writes: “if to be an existent is to have existence, and if existence is but a constant failure to be, coupled with a perpetual and futile effort to overcome that failure, human life can scarcely be a pleasant thing” (152).

able to reflect upon existences in fruitful ways. Chief among these, for him, and a pioneer in how to think about existence fruitfully, was Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas, first discovered – in the sense of made explicit philosophically – the distinction, within being, between essence and existence and thus ushered in a way to avoid the existential missteps of his forebears, his philosophical peers, and his successors. His distinction neither forgets existence, nor takes it for granted, nor fails to account for its determinate meaning, but places it at the heart of reality as its first principle – both of its unity and its actuality.

Aquinas's distinction between a thing's essence and existence argues for the idea of received existence and thus for contingency in any creature who has such a distinction.<sup>3</sup> Aquinas writes that what belongs to a thing either stems from its essence, flows from its nature, or is a received effect that is caused by an external agent. Aquinas argued, as will be explained later, that in all composite beings (i.e. finite beings) existence does not belong to a thing's essence.<sup>4</sup> If existence is external to a thing, and yet it has it, it must have received its existence from without. This can be grasped intuitively if we think of a child.<sup>5</sup> No child brings itself into existence.

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968). This of itself was an important discovery in the history of philosophy. But Gilson goes on to clarify that this distinction, alone, does not distinguish between many Christian philosophers for they all would agree that in creatures essence is distinct from existence. "Where Christian philosophers begin to disagree is on this entirely different questions: when a creature has received existence, is existence actually distinct from its essence?" (109). Gilson thought Thomas held that, in creatures, received existence still remained external to a thing's essence. See chapter five of *Being and Some Philosophers*.

<sup>4</sup> Essence here is understood to be that by which a thing is what it is. It is both the principle of definition and becoming – it is not static. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 180–181. Essences are usually expressed through a definition, and are either identical with the formal cause of a thing (as in immaterial substances) or formal cause is included within an essence but may include other elements (as in the case of material substances). Essence answers the question 'what is it?' The classic example is the essence of man = rational animal. When something does not belong to a thing's essence this trait, or thing, is accidental to it. Essential attributes are those which 'flow from' one's essential definition, as laughter is an essential attribute of rationality (contained within). Yet color is an accidental attribute of animality, and thus is not proper to any animal See Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Germany: editiones scholasticae, 2014). Also David Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), for modern explanations and defenses of the notion of essence.

<sup>5</sup> Any species will do but we will use a human child.

Existence, in a limited way, is given to the child through its parents.<sup>6</sup> A child's existence is external to it, in the sense that the child cannot cause itself to come to be, it must be brought into existence through the act of others. This simple example highlights the point about the externality of existence for finite creatures – existence must be received from without. What is received from outside of oneself, through no agency or merit of one's own, can be termed in one of three ways: burden, indifferent fact, or gift. Thus we return to Gilson's point about the need to philosophically 'account for' existence, except this time it presents itself as a question of interpretation: is it understood as a brute fact, an overwhelming burden, indeterminate reality, or a gift?

Aquinas' analysis has left me convinced that understanding existence as a gift is the only coherent answer of the three. Brute facts lack intentionality – accidental or lucky. But since existence must be received by an essence, such a movement implies an intentional act. Further, existence as a burden argues for the act of existence to be a deleterious thing for that which receives it. Yet such a claim is a secondary interpretation of existence not of existence *per se*. Thus it can be claimed that it is a burden to exist – in this way – but not that it is a burden to exist absolutely. Thus we are left with existence understood as a gift as the most coherent way of understanding existence.<sup>7</sup> The term gift preserves the character of mystery that existence possesses, while also pointing to the intentional and received character that existence bears to

---

<sup>6</sup> For the point of the introduction we will limit this conclusion to remain at the level of parental origins. I think existence points beyond that, but here is not the time to unpack that. In a proper philosophical understanding, the parents create the conditions for the child to receive existence, but they are not the primary agent of their child's existence. We will discuss this point in chapter three. In common parlance we say that a child gets its life from its parents, such a notion points to the real agency on behalf of the parents, but it misses that the parents are not – and cannot be – the sole agents nor the primary givers of existence *per se*.

<sup>7</sup> This will be the main point of chapters two and three and will be argued for there. In theory a burden could still be received from without and not be a gift. Yet I think existence escapes this label as well as we will argue in chapter three.

any finite essence. However, even if this is true, this leads us to another problem: can existence be couched in the language of giftedness given recent philosophical trends?

Is the notion of the gift still a meaningful term philosophically? Can a gift actually be given? *Prima facie* such a question may seem flip, coy or even irrelevant, as it seems to be contradicted by our common experience of giving and receiving gifts. Yet, reflection upon the gift is philosophically broached because it is such a ubiquitous part of the human experience, while also being a complex reality that defies easy characterization and identification. Evidence of the complex reality is found in both the diversity of ways gifts are exchanged, as well as in the natural suspicion and even rejection some gifts elicit. Have we ever questioned the genuineness of something that is ostensibly offered as a gift, but in which we suspect the presence of hidden motives? Or perhaps there is the gift that is offered as a repayment for something done – is this a gift proper? What about the culturally mandated times of gifting – birthdays, holidays, anniversaries – are gifts exchanged at these times just mere formalities? We experience gifts regularly, but upon reflection, gifting appears a far more complex reality to grasp precisely.

Picking up on such a complex reality as the gift, recent trends have challenged whether the giving of a gift is possible. The anthropologist Marcel Mauss, argued that the gift-exchange, in ancient and traditional societies, was a subtle means of economic exchange wrapped up in a veneer of gratuity.<sup>8</sup> Mauss stressed that the gift was locked within a cycle of reciprocity and exchange, and thus he called into question the principle of gratuity that gifts are commonly understood to have. He does not see this, necessarily, as a bad thing, but rather it challenges the notion of the existence of a ‘true gift’ – one that is given out of gratuity. As Robyn Horner points

---

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 1970).



out – gratuity and presence seem to be essential traits of the gift.<sup>9</sup> To call either into question is to call the gift itself into question.

Jacques Derrida follows upon Mauss's analysis of the gift, this time reflecting upon the gift philosophically in his work *Given Time*. Here Derrida challenges the entire notion of gift and gift giving, at least as it is commonly understood.<sup>10</sup> The gift has three essential features for Derrida – freedom, presence, and non-reciprocity. A gift must be known as a gift, must be made present to both giver and receiver, and must not be caught up in exchange or debt, for it to be a gift.<sup>11</sup> Derrida notices, however, that it is not possible for these conditions to be fulfilled, if the first two are present the third is violated, but if the first two are not present, there is no gift.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Derrida thinks these conditions of what makes a gift 'possible' also make the gift 'impossible,' because as soon as the gift is known as such, it is placed within a cycle of exchange and debt, thus violating gratuity and non-reciprocity.<sup>13</sup> In Derrida's words, "the gift is structured as an aporia."<sup>14</sup> He will try and think the gift outside of the conditions of its possibility, thus to

---

9 Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 1. "This gratuitousness is emphasized as an essential part of the gift: a gift has to be given in a certain spirit if it is to be a gift at all." Further on she writes that "freedom and presence are the conditions of the gift as we know it" (4).

10 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Mark Manolopoulos, "Derrida's Gift to Eco/Theo/Logos: A Critical Tribute," *Cross Currents* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 56. This author credits Derrida with a clear formulation

11 Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 10.

12 Ibid., 13.

13 Ibid., 12.

14 Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*, 7.

think a gift that is impossible.<sup>15</sup> The impossible gift, Derrida argues, cannot be a phenomenon of our experience – or known to us as such.<sup>16</sup>

Jean-Luc Marion, a contemporary Catholic philosopher and theologian, takes on Derrida's problematic. If Derrida's critique holds, Marion – being a phenomenologist – would have no place to discuss the gift. Marion's goal is to conceive of the gift in a way that avoids Derrida's aporia and still manifests itself as a phenomenon of our experience.<sup>17</sup> Marion truly takes on the impossible – both in the sense of the gift itself, and of trying to respond to it within the Derridean framework. Marion takes his cue from Derrida and uses his aporia structure as a guidepost to what conditions the gift needs to avoid. Using the phenomenological method of reduction Marion hopes to free the gift from being conceived within the cycle of exchange and economy that Derrida and Mauss place it within.<sup>18</sup>

In order to do this, Marion will first try to free the gift from Derrida's causal framework of giver, givee, and object given. He will attempt this through a method of reduction that brings forth the pure givenness of the gift. As such the gift is a mere given and has lost its gifted

---

15 Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 13. Does Derrida mean by the impossible that the gift is simply not possible, or, like an inventor, is Derrida philosophically pushing beyond what we think is possible to open up a new space for the gift? We will pick up this question in Chapter 1. It is important to note that Jean-Luc Marion seemed to interpret Derrida along these lines and thus responded to him within this context. John D Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999). This book presents a panel discussion Derrida and Marion had regarding their thoughts on the gift. In this discussion Derrida argues that Marion accuses Derrida of denying the gift simply, which was not Derrida's intention. Marion tries to clarify what he meant, but even John Caputo thought that Derrida gave an accurate summary of Marion's writing, and Marion's clarification did little to assuage both Derrida and Caputo's critique of Marion's picture of Derrida (See Chapter 2).

16 Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, 59. Derrida says that "it is impossible for the gift to appear as such...the event called gift is totally heterogeneous to theoretical identification, to phenomenological identification."

17 Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, 77. As Caputo notes, exchange for Marion meant cycle of causality, whereas for Derrida it meant debt. Marion wants to remove causality from the gift, Derrida wants to remove debt.

18 Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). We will unpack this further in Chapter 1 of this paper.

character. Marion reclaims the gifted character for the given through his understanding of the principle of sacrifice. In such a way, Marion hopes to challenge Derrida's framework of causality and gratuity as that which characterizes the gift, and instead offer a picture of the gift that escapes these qualities. Derrida wants to save the gift from debt; Marion wants to save it from causality. The gift, if it has been saved by Marion, is the poorer for it. The gift becomes reduced to a mere given, and through this, loses the personal and relational qualities that seem such an essential part of gifting. Marion's goal is admirable, but the result begs the question of whether the project got off on the wrong methodological foot? Must the gift be freed from its circle of reciprocal exchange? Is freedom from such a circle the only meaningful way a gift can be given?

The discussion between these two men – by far the most significant philosophical players in this debate – generated input, development and resistance from a variety of academic disciplines. They themselves continued to work on the topic of the gift, and even met to debate publically around this topic.<sup>19</sup> Other scholars joined in the conversation, largely as a push back against their conclusions. Theologically, John Millbank (1995) and Stephen Webb (1999), push back against Derrida and Marion in that they think their notions of gift and giftedness have deleterious consequences for understanding God and creation (from the Christian perspective).<sup>20</sup>

---

19 To name the major texts where this authors pick up the question of the gift: Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). Jean-Luc Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011). Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). This latter book is his most recent writing, which has two chapters dedicated to the gift. Again, we find no substantial alterations of his thought from that presented in *Being Given*. Derrida also continued his reflections in Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). He argued that death itself is a candidate of the impossible gift, because it removes itself from the cycle of exchange. The two met for a debate, which is chronicled for us by John Caputo: Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*.

20 John Millbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (1995): 119–61. For example, Millbank thinks that Marion's failure to see how exchange is constitutive of the gift, causes misunderstandings around Marion's take on the incarnation, as well as creation. (136-137). Such a misunderstanding is the role the human response plays in the divine act of creation (i.e. Mary's fiat). The gift of the incarnation, occurred through a response/exchange from Mary. Stephen Webb, *The Gifting God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Philosophically, Robyn Horner (2001) took up an attempt to synthesize, critique, and push forward the project of the two men regarding the gift.<sup>21</sup> Recently, Antonio Malo (2012) argued against them both, saying that the essence of the gift is reciprocity and he tried to demonstrate how there can be a true gift within such a paradigm.<sup>22</sup> Some have found Derrida's framework helpful for using the gift as a site of engaging with the environment and even of bridging the gap between secular and religious worldviews.<sup>23</sup> Even sociology joined the conversation in the legacy of Mauss. Peter Ashworth (2013) produced a study that challenged Mauss and Derrida's notion that obligation and reciprocity must be overcome in order for a pure gift to be given.<sup>24</sup> The major point here is that the framework for thinking about the gift, set up by Mauss, and interpreted by Derrida and Marion, remains a central one to be dealt with if any plausible notion of gift and giftedness is to be defended.

This paper argues for an understanding of gift and giftedness other than that which has been put forward by Derrida, Marion and Mauss. I will seek to recover, and to defend, the position of the gift outlined by Kenneth Schmitz in his two major works on the topic.<sup>25</sup> His position finds resonances with some of the later sources quoted above, although none of those sources use Schmitz in their work. His thought on the gift predates both Derrida and Marion, yet

---

21 Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*.

22 Antonio Malo, "The Limits of Marion's and Derrida's Philosophy of the Gift," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 52, no. 206 (2012): 149–68.

23 Mark Manolopoulos, "Gift Theory as Cultural Theory: Reconciling the Ir/religious," *Culture and Religion* 8, no. 1 (2007): 1–13. See also Manolopoulos, "Derrida's Gift to Eco/Theo/Logos: A Critical Tribute."

24 Peter D. Ashworth, "The Gift Relationship," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1–36.

25 Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 5th ed. (Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 1982). This is Schmitz's major work on the gift, which will be the focal point of our reflection. However, he also has an article that predates this text, yet deals with the same question which we reference. Kenneth Schmitz, "The Given and The Gift: Two Readings of the World.," in *The Human Person and Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, ed. Joseph Zycinski, vol. 1 (Krakow: Pontifical Faculty of Theology/Philosophical Section, 1980), 260–77.

voices an alternative to them, which does not reduce the gift – nor think it outside of the possible – but rather reflects on how it is actually experienced.

Our thesis is twofold: first to layout, and seek to defend Schmitz’s notion of the gift. Schmitz argued that gifts are neither impossible, nor can they be subject to reduction. The central feature of the gift was gratuity, yet it was a gratuity on behalf of both the giver and the receiver. Thus a gift consisted of a double action of offering and acceptance. Schmitz also argues that gifts manifest an essential feature of relationality that manifest what is really offered in a gift is a relationship of oneself. As such, no gift can be returned *per se*, since what is offered is personal and unique. A true reciprocal gift, contra Derrida, is not a return payment, or a binding debt, but a personal response made from gratitude which confirms, respects, and deepens the relationship between the two parties. What allows Schmitz to weave a coherent picture of the gift, which avoids Derrida’s aporias, is his use of the gift analogously.

Secondly, after having opened up Schmitz’s thoughts on the gift, I will seek to argue that existence is best understood under this category of gift as Schmitz understands it. For this section, like Schmitz, I will draw upon Aquinas’ essence/existence distinction to argue that existence is best understood as a gift, and the human person as a fundamentally receptive being. The gift, having been freed from the aporias from the above conversation, is able to be meaningfully predicated of existence. This notion of existence as a gift, will naturally touch on the notion of creation and *creatio ex nihilo*, but we will touch on this – not to make major theological conclusions – but as a means of reflecting on the unique nature of existence and its radically gifted quality.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Schmitz’s analysis around a metaphysics of the gift opens up fruitful possibilities for anthropology – such as an anthropology of the gift. However, while interesting, such possibilities lie outside the scope of this thesis. We will allude to them at times, but they will not be the major focus of our paper.

Thus our paper will proceed according to the following road. In chapter one we will attempt to trace the conversation as we find it today through the lens of Derrida and Marion. In-so-doing we hope to flag some problems with their conception which highlight the need to rethink the gift outside of their lens. In chapter two, we will use Kenneth Schmitz as our primary author for unpacking a new (or recovery of an older) model of understanding the gift. Chapter three will attempt to outline Aquinas' existential distinction building the case for why existence should be understood as giftedness, and how giftedness opens up a way for understanding humans as receptive, dependent, relational creatures. Chapter four builds on the problematics alluded to in chapter one, sketching what a more detailed response to Marion and Derrida's framework might look like.

### **Chapter I – Impossible Gift?**

Antonio Malo has argued that the topic of the gift has been of central importance to postmodern philosophy.<sup>27</sup> He cannot pin down the exact reason, but proffers that it has something to do with the allure that a gift and a gift-based culture offers as an alternative to our current economic environment.<sup>28</sup> Another reason, however could be the fact that the gift is such a central feature of human existence – universally present across cultures – that it is a prime phenomenon to be investigated philosophically.<sup>29</sup> Yet it is John Caputo that offers the most plausible explanation for the postmodern interest in the gift. Caputo argues that postmodernism is most attracted to topics that push the bounds of what is thought as possible, thus to think the impossible. The gift – since Derrida – has become such a notion, and thus has attracted such an

---

27 Malo, "The Limits of Marion's and Derrida's Philosophy of the Gift," 149.

28 Ibid.

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

interest.<sup>30</sup> In this section we will explore how the gift has been conceived by two of the most central figures who wrote upon the gift in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion. Each seeks to think the gift anew, to think the gift outside the possible: to think the impossible.

### 1.1 Philosophy Enters the Conversation – Derrida

Derrida accepts the tripartite distinction inherited from Mauss that posits every gift-exchange needs: a receiver, giver and gift-object.<sup>31</sup> He pushes Mauss' analysis forward, by “contending that the notion of the pure gift is unstable logically.”<sup>32</sup> He observes that the notion of a gift possesses two contradictory, and heterogeneous, elements: gratuity and reciprocity, excess and exchange.<sup>33</sup> We offer something and expect a return of something, either gratitude or a return gift; or on the other hand, we receive something and feel obliged to make a return of something for what has been received – either thanks or a counter-gift. A gift is both gratuitous, and yet seems to place the receiver in debt. Derrida thinks this is contradictory and problematic. For him the true gift must be removed from any notion of reciprocity, from exchange and thus from debt.<sup>34</sup> Derrida writes: “for a gift to exist, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, and above all no debt.”<sup>35</sup> Thus the gift, for Derrida, is constituted by its gratuity, by its non-reciprocity and also by its presence – it’s being known as a gift by the giver and receiver. Yet these conditions seems to place the gift within an aporia, precisely because they cannot all exist

30 Ibid., 71. Derrida was interested in the gift in how it could test the limits of phenomenology.

31 Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Mauss argues for this structure based on his empirical findings.

32 Ashworth, “The Gift Relationship,” 5. Mauss thought that many gifts were just veiled exchanges, but did not rule out the idea completely that all gifts are mere exchanges. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 1.

33 Manolopoulos, “Derrida’s Gift to Eco/Theo/Logos: A Critical Tribute,” 56–57.

34 Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 13.

without causing the gift to fall into a cycle of exchange and reciprocity.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the conditions of possibility are also the conditions of the gift's impossibility.<sup>37</sup> Derrida sees this impossible problematic at work in all three parts of the gift exchange: giver, recipient and gift-object.

Derrida begins demonstrating the aporia from the side of the receiver. For an action to be a gift, no cycle of exchange or counter-gifting can be entered into. Any gift that enters into the cycle of exchange and reciprocity is no longer a gift: "receiving something that has to be repaid is not a gift: it is a debt."<sup>38</sup> The only way such a cycle is to be avoided, for Derrida, is if the receiver of the gift is unaware that "the gift is being given to him. If the recipient were aware of the gift, the gift would disappear precisely because the recipient would be transformed into a debtor."<sup>39</sup> However, an offering cannot be a gift if it is not known to be a gift. This results in a twofold aporia: on the one hand, the gift must be present to the receiver if we are to speak of a gift, and yet the receiver must be unaware of any gift given if he is to avoid falling into a cycle of exchange with the giver. On the other hand, being a receiver of a gift, for Derrida, is necessarily to feel obliged toward, or be in debt to, the giver of the gift. Yet the essence of a true gift is to be outside of this cycle of debt and exchange. What is both necessary for the gift (the receiver, and the feeling of indebtedness) is, at the same time, the conditions of the impossibility of the gift.

On the side of the receiver, there is an aporia that is unresolvable – a gift must be made present,

---

35 Malo, "The Limits of Marion's and Derrida's Philosophy of the Gift," 151. In French there are two words for gift: don and cadeau. Many thanks to one of my thesis panelists John C. who clued me into this distinction. By cadeau, Derrida means the daily gift-giving that he acknowledges we participate in all the time, whereas by don Derrida is referring to a site of the impossible. Even with this distinction, Derrida's thoughts on the gift still leave something to be desired which I hope this first chapter will reveal.

36 Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 27–28. An aporia is an unsolvable problem, usually on account of its contradictory poles. As Horner points out "Derrida...powerfully highlights the contradictory tension in its very definition, who points out its aporetic qualities."

37 Ibid., 13.

38 Malo, "The Limits of Marion's and Derrida's Philosophy of the Gift," 152.

39 Ibid., 151.



and yet if it is made present it is no longer a pure gift.<sup>40</sup> Derrida turns next to the giver and highlights a similar movement.

Like the recipient, the donor is a necessary condition for thinking about the gift. A gift must be given by someone. Yet, like the recipient, the donor's presence is both the possibility and the impossibility of the gift. The paradox that was applied to the receiver is also applied to the donor. "If the donor does not know himself as giver, there is no gift...on the other hand knowing himself as a giver makes the donor introduce the gift into an economic cycle."<sup>41</sup> If the giver acknowledges that he is giving a gift, then there is an implicit hope or expectation of return.<sup>42</sup> Derrida argues that something as small as gratitude shown for a gift is a type of exchange. Even when no counter-gift is given in terms of an object, if any return is made to the giver (as little as grateful acknowledgment) then this annuls the gift by making it a type of exchange.<sup>43</sup> Worse than an exchange, a gift becomes a type of taking – where the giver gives only to take in return. The giver, as long as he is giving intentionally to someone, always gives with the expectation of receiving something in return: a boost to his ego, or a counter-gift at a later date. Thus the donor, as long as he is present, is not able to ensure that the gift is able to remain outside of the cycle of exchange. And yet if he is absent, the gift is not possible – thus

---

40 Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 9.

41 Malo, "The Limits of Marion's and Derrida's Philosophy of the Gift," 152.

42 Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 8.

43 Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Worse than just exchange, Derrida thinks that giving would be a type of taking. The gift should be constituted by a type of letting go or offering, but if the donor expects something in return, the gift becomes a type of taking from the receiver.

another aporia results for Derrida. This, again, leads Derrida to conclude that the conditions which make the gift possible also make it impossible.<sup>44</sup>

Caputo calls Derrida an apostle of the impossible. In fact Derrida's main interest in the gift was because he thought it was an example of the impossible.<sup>45</sup> The impossible, within postmodernism, is not understood to be impossible absolutely, but rather that which is outside of what is normally conceived as possible.<sup>46</sup> Derrida's own words, confirm this explanation of Caputo: "I said...that it is impossible for the gift to appear as such. So the gift does not exist as such, if by existence we understand being present and intuitively identified as such...but I never concluded that there is no gift...the event called gift is totally heterogeneous to theoretical identification, to phenomenological identification."<sup>47</sup> Thus for Derrida the gift's aporias highlight that it cannot be known by us, or that it has not yet arrived, but not that it is impossible *per se*. The impossible gift can be thought, and thus can become an object of hope for us, and may even be a deed that we do, but it can never be a thing that we know we are doing or have done.<sup>48</sup> Derrida's impossible gift is a call to dream of what could be, yet it still is an undermining of the gift as it is experienced phenomenologically – for he denies that it can be a datum of our experience.

---

44 Ibid., 13. "we are here departing, in a preemptory and distinct fashion from this tradition." This is the tradition that tried to conceive of the gift within the conditions of the possible. Derrida is trying to imagine new conditions for the gift that under the old tradition would seem impossible.

45 Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, 3.

46 Ibid. Thus Derrida looked for what was impossible and began to think around these topics. Further, he thought that the impossible could not be broken by clever thought maneuvers, but only by deeds.

47 Ibid., 59.

48 Ibid., 60. As Derrida writes: "the gift cannot be known, but it can be thought of." And further on he says: "a gift is something you do without knowing what you do, without knowing who gives the gift, who receives the gift, and so on." He is even more explicit at the roundtable discussion. See footnote #16.

His main point seems to be a rejection of reciprocity as inherent within a gift because it entails debt: “if there is a gift, it cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects, things, or symbols.”<sup>49</sup> In trying to preserve a notion of ‘pure-gift’ Derrida rejects any interpersonal aspect to be present in a gift. Debt inhibits gratuity, on behalf of the receiver; and the presence of return inhibits gratuity on the side of the giver. To try and carve out a space for the gift that ensures its separate existence from reciprocity and exchange, causes Derrida to posit a very high standard for the gift, nay impossible conditions:

for there to be a gift, not only must the donor or donee not perceive or receive the gift as such, have no consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition; he or she must also forget it right away and moreover this forgetting must be so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic categorially of forgetting. This forgetting of the gift must even no longer be forgetting in the sense of repression.<sup>50</sup>

Manolopoulos argues that Derrida identifies the two poles of the gift – excess and exchange – and yet tries to collapse the gift into the pole of excess and pure gratuity.<sup>51</sup> Paradoxically, the gift leaves its trace, but at the same time, erases its presence so that all that one can have is the notion of the gift which, Derrida seems to think, points to its reality even if such a reality is necessarily forgotten. For Derrida, on account of this condition of forgetting, the gift “can have no decidable origin, cannot exist as such, and can have no decidable destination.”<sup>52</sup> It seems to be akin to a shooting star, which we get only a trace off and yet this trace is never certain – like a dream – for it is forgotten before it is recognized. It is interesting to note that, in Derrida’s conception of giftedness, gratitude is eliminated, as are interpersonal relationships. As John Millbank writes,

---

49 Malo, “The Limits of Marion’s and Derrida’s Philosophy of the Gift,” 188.

50 Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 16.

51 Manolopoulos, “Derrida’s Gift to Eco/Theo/Logy: A Critical Tribute,” 59.

52 Malo, “The Limits of Marion’s and Derrida’s Philosophy of the Gift,” 192.

for Derrida, “a true gift would be from no-one, to no-one, and of nothing. But this gift cannot be given, since subject and object exhaust the whole of ontological reality.”<sup>53</sup> At best Derrida holds out the possibility of the gift, but rejects that we could ever know a gift as such. Ultimately, this is to reject the possibility of the gift being a phenomenon of our experience.<sup>54</sup> It is on this point that the phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion attempts to push back against Derrida and carve out a space for the gift within our experience.

## 1.2. Phenomenology to the rescue?

Derrida took Mauss’ observation to its logical conclusion. Mauss posited that most gifts are merely disguised self-interested exchanges; Derrida followed upon this and argued that we should take off the disguise and realize that a true gift is impossible to be given under the current conditions, and thus if it is given, it will not be known as such. There is an honesty in Derrida that is admirable. The conditions that are possible for the gift are, at the same time, the conditions that make it impossible. Marion wants to salvage the notion of the gift and yet must respond to Derrida’s aporias of gratuity and reciprocity<sup>55</sup> Marion finds Derrida’s account extremely helpful for a framing of the problem, as well as, paradoxically, the illumination of a

---

53 Milbank, “Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic,” 130.

54 See Footnote #16. Also, it is noteworthy that Derrida himself, was led by this aporia of the gift, to grasp at something which might still be meaningfully labeled as a gift. He settles, famously, on the ides of death. Yet Derrida himself found such a conclusion tough to reconcile existentially. See Manolopoulos, “Derrida’s Gift to Eco/Theo/Logy: A Critical Tribute,” 55. He even seems to despair of the notion that the gift retains any meaning. “But at some point I’m ready to give up the word. Since this word is finally contradictory, I am ready to give up this word at some point.” Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, 67. Such a conclusion should prompt a reflection on Derrida’s framework if it results in an abandonment of any meaningfulness of the gift *per se*.

55 Marion deals with the gift in a number of works. His thought remains complex and nuanced. I have chosen to limit our selection to his thought to his works *Being Given* and *Negative Certainties*. I have limited myself to these because the former initiated his thoughts on the gift, and the latter is his most recent thoughts on the topic. Thus, for the sake of clarity, and to focus our thoughts on how Marion develops the notion of the gift – we pose to limit ourselves to these two texts primarily. We will use a commentator to dip into his other works where relevant (Robyn Horner).

path forward.<sup>56</sup> It is useful to quote Marion in full here to get a sense of how he thinks of the question of the gift after the aporias set up by Derrida:

to be sure, it [Derrida's analysis] establishes the conditions under which what one names a gift becomes impossible, but in no way does it establish that what thus becomes impossible still deserves the name gift...my response, therefore, is that the conditions of impossibility simply prove that what was studied did not deserve the title gift and that, if there ever were to be a gift, it would necessarily have *other conditions of possibility* than those of its impossibility...this means positively: the gift can never again be envisaged within the system of exchange, the reciprocity of which connects giver and givee and freezes it in presence.

Marion credits Derrida for helping him see that if the conditions of the gift annul the gifts phenomenality, then the gift needs to be conceived under new conditions.<sup>57</sup> Thus Marion's goal will be to think the gift outside of the terms of exchange. For it is these terms that lock the gift within a cycle of reciprocity. Marion will seek out a new horizon for the gift.<sup>58</sup>

This is the challenge that he believes Derrida has left philosophy and, in particular, phenomenology. This is the challenge he takes up by conceiving the gift according to reduction and givenness. "Reducing the gift to givenness...means: thinking the gift while abstracting it from the threefold transcendence that affected it hence for...the giver...the givee...and the object

---

<sup>56</sup> Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 84. Marion credits Derrida for flagging what makes a gift impossible as what helped Marion think about the ways of making the gift possible (i.e. by eliminating each one of Derrida's impediments to the gift).

<sup>57</sup> Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, 59. Derrida thinks that Marion misunderstands him and brings this up to Marion. The point for Derrida is that the gift cannot be phenomenologically described, not that it needs new conditions. Derrida wants to save the gift from debt, Marion wants to save the gift from causality.

<sup>58</sup> Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 94. But we can do justice...to the gift as such, only by leaving the horizon of exchange and economy...we will discover this other horizon only by restraining the phenomenon of the gift from sliding down into an exchange, and by maintaining it in itself: that is by reducing the gift to itself, and thus to givenness, which is the gift's proper horizon."

exchanged.”<sup>59</sup> Only in this way does Marion think he will be able to avoid Derrida’s aporias and to let the gift return as an intelligible phenomenon of our experience.

### 1.3 Reduce, Reveal, Reframe

Marion’s method of reduction is based on his understanding of phenomenology. He understands phenomenology as a collapsing of the distinction between appearance and reality.<sup>60</sup> Thus what appears phenomenologically, is the thing itself (no mere accident of it or appearance of it that must be gotten beyond). For Marion, phenomenology does not seek to impose upon any phenomenon an *a priori* ‘ought’ that it should conform too; rather it seeks to describe, receive, and let it appear as it wishes.<sup>61</sup> The fundamental principle of Marion’s phenomenology is self-described as: “so much reduction, so much givenness.”<sup>62</sup> Marion thinks that his phrase, with its focus on givenness is a more accurate description and synthesis of what phenomenology is, as a method and as a philosophy.<sup>63</sup> He writes “I have but one theme: if the phenomena is defined as what shows itself in and from itself (Heidegger), instead of as what admits constitution (Husserl), this self can be attested only inasmuch as the phenomena gives itself.”<sup>64</sup>

---

59 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 84.

60 Jean-Luc Marion, “The Other First Philosophy and the Question of Givenness,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 784–800. He writes: “appearing (on the side of consciousness) and what appears (on the side of the thing) are connected according to the principle...of correlation only because the first counts as a given and the second, givenness, gives” (794).

61 Ibid 796. Thus, according to Marion, phenomenology seeks to put let the phenomenon appear “no longer as it ought (in terms of the supposedly a priori conditions of experience and its objects) but as it gives itself (from itself and in as much as itself).”

62 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 3.

63 See the following article as his summary of how he understands phenomenology as the only first (or last) philosophy. Further, it reveals how Marion understands his method as a better description of the phenomenological tradition as well as being rooted within it. Marion, “The Other First Philosophy and the Question of Givenness.”

64 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 4.

We cannot describe the full development of his method, but we will describe how he uses it with respect to the gift.<sup>65</sup> What is critical to understand is that such a method seeks to: “suspend...the false realities of the natural attitude...in order to let lived experience” manifest itself, and “its operation culminates in a clearing away of the obstacles to manifestation.”<sup>66</sup> Such a method enables the thing to show itself, and Marion argues that this showing is characterized by givenness.<sup>67</sup> Reduction or bracketing is a way that the phenomenologist can remove roadblocks, or aporias, that prevent the thing from showing itself in its purity.<sup>68</sup> Marion attempts to use such a method to wrest the gift from its own aporias within the framework of exchange. It will involve two distinct steps: the first is reduction of the gift to givenness, and the second is a recovery of the gift through sacrifice. Like a magician’s act, there is the disappearance, and then the reveal. Yet, what Marion hopes to cause to disappear is not the gift, but the aporias of Derrida.

For a gift to be given, he thinks that it is not gratuity which must constitute it, but the impossibility of a return gift (or exchange).<sup>69</sup> A true gift must “be lost and remain lost without return.”<sup>70</sup> Marion calls this the law of non-return and this law must always be preserved if a gift is to be given. This non-return can only be accomplished if a gift can be removed from its causal

---

65 Michel Henry, Joseph Rivera, and George E. Faithful, “The Four Principles of Phenomenology,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (2015): 1–21. This article gives a succinct presentation of the development within phenomenology which Marion’s method both inherits and pushes forward.

66 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 10. We see a glimpse of Marion’s intent to use this method to remove the gift from the aporias which Derrida’s thought has enveloped it in.

67 Marion spends all of chapter 1 situating his method within the phenomenological tradition and arguing for why the method should be characterized as givenness.

68 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Chapter 1. For a complete explanation of his method. See also Marion, *Negative Certainties*, chapter 3.

69 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 86.

70 *Ibid.*, 85.

framework. He hopes to bring forth the real notion of the gift after reducing and removing it from its exchange framework. Marion will search for examples of gifts, within his experience, which are both true gifts and yet where one of the elements of exchange is bracketed or found to be non-essential.<sup>71</sup> If he can find such examples, he thinks this is evidence that giftedness can be lifted from a cycle of exchange and reciprocity. We will look at two of his examples of bracketing: first on the side of the receiver and second on the side of the gift-object.

The first, and most essential, piece of the causal framework to be bracketed is the receiver. “Not only does the bracketing of the givee not invalidate the givenness of the gift, but it characterizes it intrinsically: without this suspension of the givee the very possibility of giving the gift would become problematic.”<sup>72</sup> It’s not that there need not be a receiver, but rather, that the giver and receiver can be bracketed from one another to prevent reciprocity. An example of a gift with a bracketed receiver is a donation to a humanitarian aid program. Such a giver gives to a receiver through a mediator – thus both giver and receiver remain unknown to the other and thus neither is able to enter into a reciprocal relation with the other. Both become bracketed to the other.<sup>73</sup> The giver does not know to whom he gives, thus the gift can be truly considered to be abandoned, and thus fall within the law of non-return.<sup>74</sup> Such a giver will receive nothing in return from the recipient and thus has made a real gift. Marion has found an example where the

71 Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 94–95. “In order to appear, the gift reduced to givenness would only have to be given – no more no less – without having to render reason for itself by reverting to revenue and making the least return on investment. This means describing the gift without reconstituting the terms of exchange. For if the giver were to give without a recipient to acknowledge it with gratitude, or if the recipient were to receive without any giver to honor, or even if both the giver and the recipient were to exchange no given thing, then in each case one of the conditions of possibility in exchange would be missing, and the gift would be realized absolutely and as such. Let us attempt such a threefold description of the gift that has been freed from the terms of exchange.” See also Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 83.

72 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 85.

73 Ibid., 87. The point, for Marion, is that on the part of the receiver the giver is unknown, and on the part of the giver the receiver is unknown – thus avoiding any possibility of a return.

74 Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 94–95. Marion uses the same example in his later work.



gift has been freed from at least one of the elements of exchange.<sup>75</sup> We will pass over his bracketing of the giver and hone in on the bracketing of the gift-object.<sup>76</sup>

“The previous two bracketing’s leave nothing in play but the gift – free from giver and givee.”<sup>77</sup> Marion sees in this that the gift comes forth, shows itself, without direct reference to either giver or givee. His examples hope to show that a gift does not, essentially, depend on their agency. There is something about the gift itself that is independent of these two. Yet is the gift bound to the object exchanged?<sup>78</sup> Is the reduced gift merely an object that passes between two parties, even if they are bracketed? Marion thinks that this is not the case, that the gift can be reduced beyond its mere materiality. Thus the gift itself is not reducible to an object, but it is something the object reveals as a symbol.

His illustration to highlight the final bracketing is that of wedding rings. The rings are not the gift that is being offered – as if a married couple bought a piece of gold to give to one another full stop. Rather, the rings represent the real gift, which is the entire person offered permanently to the other in love.<sup>79</sup> The real gift occurs without object or discernable transfer, it only manifests itself through such external symbols: “the gift does not consist in an object, because it does not at all consist.”<sup>80</sup> The objects, Marion thinks, are strictly external and, even, incidental to the gift,

---

75 Marion gives further examples of an enemy and an ingrate as other cases where the givee is bracketed.

76 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 94. Marion’s example of a giver being bracketed can be intuited by reversing his example of the humanitarian aid program. Another example would be the case of a willed inheritance. Here the giver may not be anonymous, but he is still bracketed, in the sense that he is no longer alive. The gift is still made to a receiver, but the giver, who is no longer accessible, cannot receive a return on the gift and thus the gift is still removed from the cycle of exchange. Thus Marion has found a situation in which the giver is non-essential to the gift, and yet the gift is not annulled: it still reveals itself.

77 Ibid., 102.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., 103.

80 Ibid., 105.

and thus even the gift-object can be bracketed.<sup>81</sup> The gift itself has been shown to be able to exist with the elements of exchange bracketed. Thus Marion thinks that what is proper to the gift is none of these three elements.

In getting at the phenomenon in itself – understood as givenness – Marion is interested in seeing what is revealed by the phenomenon intrinsically. For the gift, Marion has argued that giver, givee and gift-object, are not intrinsic to the gift, but extrinsic to it. Thus he is left to show what is internal to the gift that it reveals of itself? Marion thinks that a gift becomes a gift on the side of the giver through *givability*; and on the side of the receiver through *acceptability*. These traits are internal to the gift and are what the gift reveals and shows in itself to each party. These traits are the effect, the pure givenness, which the gift reveals to both giver and receiver respectively.

Givability results when the gift imposes itself on the giver as something to be given. Marion is careful about his word choice, because it reveals that the giver is not the cause of the gift, but rather that the gift imposes itself – as an effect or event – upon the giver which compels him to give such a gift. This principle of givability transforms an object into a gift in the eyes of the giver. The gift consists not in a transferred object, but in its givability.<sup>82</sup> As Malo explains, a gift becomes a gift, “not when it is given, but when the giver considers it able to be given.”<sup>83</sup>

Givability results when this phenomenon appears “in such a way that it demands, of itself,

---

81 Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 106. He does not exclude gifts where the object is essential to its giving. Rather, he is content with finding gifts where such an object is a mere symbol, as evidence that the gift itself is not reducible to an object, but rather, such an object can be bracketed to get at what is more essential and immaterial within the gift itself. Further, on page 97 – Marion thinks that the truest gift is the gift of self, which is no material object and thus not able to be reduced to exchange. The danger in gifting is that the object takes over for the actual gift of self.

82 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 107. See also Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 108.

83 Malo, “The Limits of Marion’s and Derrida’s Philosophy of the Gift,” 158.

passing to the state of a gift, of giving itself.”<sup>84</sup> The reduced gift, reduced to givenness, is characterized by an effect – givability – which appears and gives itself to the giver: “the gift decides its givenness by itself and decides its giver by itself, by appearing indisputably as givable and by making itself be given.”<sup>85</sup> Thus it is not the giver that constitutes the gift, but the gift that constitutes this person as a giver, by appearing as something giveable.<sup>86</sup>

The gift has a similar effect on the side of the receiver. Marion’s point here is that a gift, to be fulfilled, must be accepted. A gift can be given and yet rejected or ignored, thus – in some sense – it is a gift that is incomplete. Yet, he asks, what makes a gift to be accepted? Is it the pure will of the receiver, or is it the burden of indebtedness toward the giver? Marion thinks it is this principle of *acceptability*. The reduced gift gives itself to the receiver through being revealed as acceptable and thus demanding to be accepted by the receiver.<sup>87</sup> A gift becomes a gift, not when it is received “but when the receiver considers it as a gift, that is, as able to be accepted.”<sup>88</sup> The gift “reduced as what decides itself (as receivable and givable) gets its character ‘given’ from givenness, which is to say from itself. The gift is given intrinsically to give itself.”<sup>89</sup> Similar to the giver, such an act, is constituted by the gift itself, not by the will of the receiver.

---

84 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 107.

85 Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 109. Marion gives no real example of how this happens. Further he thinks that his explanation does more justice to how and why a giver chooses to give this gift here and now.

86 Malo, “The Limits of Marion’s and Derrida’s Philosophy of the Gift,” 158.

87 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 111.

88 Malo, “The Limits of Marion’s and Derrida’s Philosophy of the Gift,” 158–159.

89 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 113. Marion’s final point here is very intriguing. For he has arrived at an understanding of the reduced gift that is constituted by givability and acceptability. The intrinsic principle of acceptability reveals that for a gift to be complete it must be received. This means that a givee is always part of the event of the gift understood in its fullest sense. Marion seems to make this point in his final chapter. A gift calls out to be received! Marion pushes this final point even further, in saying that the givee, through receiving the gift, also receives himself. Thus as a receptive creature, one is fulfilled only through the act of receiving.

In a standard gift exchange, what transpires is a giver gives an object to a recipient. Yet in such a standard exchange, according to Marion, the gift is annulled because it enters into a cycle of exchange, understood by him in terms of causality. To remove it from this framework, Marion attempted to think the gift outside of exchange, where one or more of the causal pieces could be bracketed. This allowed him to zero in on what a gift would be outside of exchange. But his framework, the bracketing of the gift from giver, receiver and object, seems to cause the gift to disappear, at least as a phenomenon of our experience. Derrida himself makes this charge against him.<sup>90</sup> All of Marion's examples seem to be a gift in theory, but to the people who receive them they do not appear like a gift *per se*. For Marion, a true gift is that which is given, but which detaches from the giver – appearing only as a given, as something which is there, or abandoned. The giver thus becomes bracketed, hidden, even lost, as that which is given takes center stage phenomenally. But as the giver is masked, so too is the entire gift process – it appears only as a found object. A gift can only appear as something not given, or as something merely given and there.<sup>91</sup> The gift masks itself when it operates outside of exchange. Thus Marion will need to make the gift reappear again and to do this he will appeal to the principle of sacrifice which un.masks the gift within experience.<sup>92</sup>

Marion thinks that sacrifice plays the role of allowing the gifted character of the phenomenon to appear without reducing it to mere exchange. In sacrifice, one gives up or abandons something – often for a particular reason. Marion thinks that “sacrifice supposes a gift already given...and gives the gift back to givenness from which it proceeds, and whose mark it

---

90 Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, 65.

91 Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 122. “The major aporia of the gift derives from this paradox: the gift given can appear only by erasing in its phenomenon its giver, the process of its gift, and ultimately, its entire gift-character.”

92 We will only discuss the role of sacrifice to illustrate the point. Marion thinks forgiveness does this too.

should always bear.”<sup>93</sup> Thus to sacrifice something, to give something up, is an action that reconstitutes as gifted something that appears as merely given. It is a seeing, within what is given, the gifted character which lies hidden. It is not a return or denial of what has been given, but it is a reconstituting of what has been given as a gift.<sup>94</sup> This move, for Marion, makes up the hermeneutic and phenomenology of the gift. For the given appears as abandoned and merely there. To choose to see it as gift – even if this is the correct choice – is one option among many. The act of sacrifice makes this choice, to see what appears as given, as that which is actually gifted.

With his principle of sacrifice, Marion thinks he has capped off his effort to secure a place for the gift to appear as a phenomenon of our experience without being reduced to the logic of exchange. The gift was reduced to givenness which allowed it to manifest outside of some, if not all, of the elements of exchange (giver, givee, object given). As such, a true gift was seen to be absent any notion of reciprocity. Further, Marion highlighted that what is really given, is no real object but rather is the gift of self or some other immaterial aspect – like time, or fatherhood. As such, it is impossible for there to be reciprocity since what is really offered is no object. Further, since the reduced gift appears as what is abandoned and thus as what is not a gift, Marion employed the principle of sacrifice which reconstitutes the given as gift. This it does as an act of hermeneutics which chooses to see in what is merely there the gifted character and thus the hidden face of the giver. Sacrifice recognizes that the object is not the real gift, but the self of the giver, which is seen when the object of sacrifice is offered over.

#### **1.4 A Need to Rethink**

---

<sup>93</sup> Marion, *Negative Certainties*, 126.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 128. His example is the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. The sacrifice was Abraham recognizing that Isaac was from God and thus not his.

Derrida's analysis asked us to dream of a gift outside of its current conditions of possibility. To dare to dream, and to desire, the impossible. Derrida's gift, if it can exist – cannot be known – and if it cannot be realized, is a longed-for reality that has not yet arrived. Through his account, philosophy and reality seem to take a step apart – for Derrida's analysis seems to deny that an intentional offering of a gift is possible. Thus what exists in cultures around the world would be – at best – a futile madness that desires to give/do what is actually impossible. At worst it is a subtle game of deception. Derrida's high bench mark for the gift, as well as his denial of any form of gratitude and reciprocity seems to impose on the gift a standard that is so high that it strains credulity both philosophically and experientially.<sup>95</sup>

Marion's analysis responds to Derrida's aporias by thinking the gift outside the law of reciprocity and the elements of exchange. His analysis draws out some helpful features around gifting, like the invisible gift that the object itself symbolizes; or the role of sacrifice as a way of bringing forward into experience the gifted character of what can be seen as merely given. However, Marion seems to sacrifice too much to Derrida's high standard, especially that of non-reciprocity. Beside the objections that can and will be raised against his approach (especially his mischaracterization of causality, and the failure of his examples to exclude the gift from causality), a central problematic is how the gift itself is reduced to a level that leaves it outside of a personal exchange.<sup>96</sup> Marion, in trying to save the gift from Derrida, sacrifices the personal character that seems essential to what a gift is (or at least as it is experienced to be). With the

---

95 This is a critique that is lobbed against him even by his intellectual sympathizers. See: Manolopoulos, "Derrida's Gift to Eco/Theo/Logy: A Critical Tribute." Here Manolopoulos faults Derrida for trying to collapse the gift into pure excess and forgetting about the real element of exchange, reciprocity, which is present in the gift.

96 John Milbank makes a similar point. Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," 137.

method of bracketing, Marion explicitly excludes this from the notion of the gift, to stay within the limits of his law of non-return.

Must the gift be removed from any personal encounter between individuals or groups? Is Marion's analysis of the gift, and the examples he gives, exhaustive of what constitutes a gift or is it merely a technique to try and uncover the pure givenness of a gift? If it is a technique, Marion does not make that explicit, and if it is exhaustive, then the possibility of offering a gift is much reduced from what we commonly perceive. Must gifts only be given to: enemies, ingrates, anonymously, posthumously or the others that he enumerates? What about gifts between friends? And if the law of non-return must hold, where does this leave the virtue of gratitude – which is expressed toward a giver for a gift received? Is it really possible for a gift to self-constitute itself without any trace of a giver? Marion's analysis begs this and many other questions. I think, as such, the gift needs to be rethought. In particular, because both Derrida and Marion remove any personal character within the gift itself and thus pose a challenge to the existence of any gift that seeks to be personal and relational. To rethink the gift we will turn to another thinker – Kenneth Schmitz – and unpack his argument for the personal nature of the gift.

## **Chapter 2 – A Different Road to the Gift**

Before jumping into Schmitz's thoughts on the gift we will make a small digression as to how Schmitz came to write on the gift. This digression is important, because Schmitz wrote on the gift prior to Derrida and Marion, and thus his reasons differ from theirs in taking up the topic. Further, Schmitz never formally entered into conversation with Derrida or Marion around their

writings on the gift – thus their juxtaposition may appear strange at first.<sup>97</sup> As we hope to show such juxtaposition is justified and even fruitful.

James Kow argues, convincingly, that the idea of the gift played a prominent role in the thought of Kenneth Schmitz.<sup>98</sup> While only two works, within his massive corpus, were explicitly dedicated to the topic, the idea of the gift recurs in his thought under discussions such as: created receptivity, personalism, and relationality, and even his writings on modernism and postmodernism.<sup>99</sup> Schmitz began reflecting on the gift through anthropology, yet it was by coming into contact with the writings of St. Anselm and St. Thomas that he began to see the importance of the gift on the metaphysical level.<sup>100</sup> He found that St. Thomas’s “metaphysics begins with a gift, a certain plenitude.”<sup>101</sup> This plenitude is *esse* – or act. For Thomas there is a

97 The only published interaction between Schmitz and Marion is when Schmitz writes a book review on one of Marion’s works. Kenneth Schmitz, “The God of Love,” *The Thomist* 57, no. 1 (1993): 497–508. Here, he both praises the mind of Marion, as well as offers a critique of some of his conclusions. He is thus aware of Marion’s project and its benefits, but he is also critical of Marion’s method. He never directly engages with Marion on the topic of gift. Schmitz does explicitly address (and critiques) Derrida’s notion of the gift – albeit briefly – in the following article: Kenneth Schmitz, “An Addendum to Further Discussion,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1999): 277–90. He will also address Derrida’s overall philosophical project in two other articles: Kenneth Schmitz, “Postmodern or Modern-Plus?,” *Communio* 17, no. Summer (1990): 152–66, and Kenneth Schmitz, “Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1999): 233–52. The two, however, never interacted around this topic directly. Caputo and Schmitz had a brief exchange, which is the closest thing to a thinker like Derrida interacting with Schmitz. John D Caputo, “Commentary on Ken Schmitz; ‘Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition,’” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1999): 253–59.

98 James Kow, “The Philosophy of Kenneth Schmitz: The Recovery and Discovery of Things, Being, and the Person,” in *Person, Being & History: Essays in Honor of Kenneth L. Schmitz*, ed. Robert E. Wood and Michael Baur (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 37. He writes: “to recover wonder, for Schmitz, has been not merely his life’s project, but rather his vocation or mission. Essentially, it is not the recovery of the whole, but rather a rediscovery of creation; it is a rediscovery of the deep sense that we are gifted and that the appropriate response ingredient in this creaturely condition is the *esse* posture of gratitude.”

99 Kenneth Schmitz, “Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete,” *The Thomist* 61 (1997): 339–72. Also Kenneth Schmitz, “The First Principles of Personal Becoming,” *Review of Metaphysics* 47, no. 4 (1994): 757–66. Kenneth Schmitz, *The Texture of Being: Essays in First Philosophy*, ed. Paul O’Herron, vol. 46, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007). These are three examples of where the idea of a metaphysics of the gift appears in his writings.

100 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 29. As he writes: “I myself had come to appreciate the importance of this category by a different route, namely that of anthropology.”

101 *Ibid.*, 99–100. Schmitz contrasts this with Hegel’s beginning which is not plenitude or act, but emptiness and potency which needs filling.



fullness at the root of reality, and such a fullness is diffusive and creative. This creative act, at the heart of reality, donates act to other beings, who are a mixture of act and potency – *esse* and essence. Thomas’ distinction, between a thing’s essence and its existence, led Schmitz to view created *esse* through the category of the gift.<sup>102</sup> Schmitz writes that Thomas sheds light, through this distinction, on the core gift in creatures which is that of existence.<sup>103</sup> Thomas’ metaphysical distinction, awakens Schmitz to see that giftedness is not merely a part of reality, but it is at its very core. St. Anselm, helps Schmitz see that such a gift has radical import for the nature of the creature – the gifted character of existence permeates the creature to his core.

Anselm, following on Augustine, attempted to reflect on what Christians mean when they claim the world was made from nothing - *creatio ex nihilo*. His problem is that such a proposition seems to contradict logic – for how can something come from nothing?<sup>104</sup> Yet Anselm argues that there are two ways to understand from nothing. The first is along the lines of agency, and the second is along the lines of matter (or material causality). In the first sense, creation is not from nothing because it is from divine agency – thus not violating logical principles. However, nothing, understood along the second sense, means not made from any material thing – from ‘no thing.’<sup>105</sup> It is this second sense of nothing which the Christian term – *creatio ex nihilo* – meant to single out. Nothing in this sense understands God to be not a principle of creation (along with co-eternal matter) but rather *the* principle of creation, creating even the matter itself.<sup>106</sup> The absolute privation of creation, understood as nothing, points – for

---

102 Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 54-59. We will unpack Thomas’ distinction in chapter three.

103 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 97.

104 Ibid, 29.

105 Ibid.

106 Thomas makes this same point – presumably building off of Anselm – in S.T. I Q. 45 Art. 1 Reply Obj. 3. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/summa/index.html>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016.

Schmitz – to the principle of receptivity to permeate the core of creation and all creatures.<sup>107</sup>

“Creation is to be understood as the reception of a good not due in any way, so that there cannot be even a subject of the reception. It is absolute reception, there is not something which receives, but rather sheer receiving.”<sup>108</sup> Creation, then, is a donation from nothing – an endowment that is radical, total, and absolutely gratuitous. Creation, understood as *ex nihilo*, is a gift – the original gift. From St. Anselm and St. Thomas’s reflections on the *nihilam* of creation and *esse*, Schmitz’s thoughts on the gift emerged.<sup>109</sup>

Schmitz was growing more and more convinced of the truly gifted character of existence, and reality, but he found, through interactions with his contemporary thought culture that such a view was not the dominant opinion. There were certain intellectual movements that challenged a vision of the world as gift.<sup>110</sup> Schmitz saw that the main challenge was a vision of the world as merely given.<sup>111</sup> His first article on giftedness was to try and frame the two visions of the world.

---

107 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 31. Schmitz highlights how Anselm’s use of privation is unique and yet is fecund for it highlights how creation has nothing to do with the creature and is totally an act of generous donation on behalf of the creator.

108 *Ibid.*, 33.

109 Luis Dupré has a great essay on the revolution in thought that occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which would open up a space for religion and philosophy to once again dialogue which allowed Schmitz to reflect on *creatio ex nihilo*. Louis Dupré, “The Gift and the Giving,” in *Person, Being & History: Essays in Honor of Kenneth L. Schmitz*, ed. Michael Baur and Robert E. Wood (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 48–56.

110 Before writing on the gift Schmitz wrote “Transcendental and Empirical Pressures in Human Subjectivity,” *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy Fordham University Quarterly* 56, no. 222 (1981): 272–86. This article argued for a modern philosophical development that occurred in three distinct steps. The first which saw the world as given – which reflects a scientific paradigm that is applied to all reality. The second, was Hegel and his argument that the world was not given, but self-given. This is better, but the third step, made the self that gives to be man himself. Thus man became the center of meaning, the giver of meaning, in a world that was merely given or just there. We might call this development a radical unity within the world that closes it off to the notion of a gift. Schmitz notices a second development in theology, which posits the creature and creation as radically distinct from the creator. He traces this theme in his article: Kenneth Schmitz, “Weiss and Creation,” *Review of Metaphysics* 18, no. 1 (1964): 147–69. This essay clued Schmitz into the need to recover and rearticulate a vision of creation as gifted and to face – head on – the objections to such a view that lead people to see the world as given, or the creature as too radically separated from its creator. We might call this a radical vision of diversity which Schmitz was against.

111 Schmitz, “The Given and The Gift: Two Readings of the World.” This article was his first attempt to think through this problem. He expands the seeds of his thoughts into a longer lecture two years later.

He framed the question around two literary characters: Prometheus and Palamedes. The former, represented a stance towards the gods of antagonism and competition. The later, represented a stances towards the divine as receptive and seeing his talents and life as gifted. One takes, the other receives. At the core of the two visions, Schmitz saw these basic attitudes at play.<sup>112</sup> His more substantial work on the gift attempts to argue for one over the other, and it is here that his thoughts on the gift come to their maturity.<sup>113</sup> For Schmitz the world and the gift had become too reduced in modern thought and needed to be enlivened and widened.<sup>114</sup> It is this widening of the gift, to allow such a term to be predicated of creation, which is the main impulse behind Schmitz's writings on the gift.<sup>115</sup>

Schmitz's interest in trying to widen the idea of the gift make his writings apt to be put into conversation with Marion and Derrida, even though these two were not his explicit interlocutors on this topic. Marion and Derrida represent a reducing of the notion of the gift. On the one hand, Derrida reduces the gift, either completely, or at least as a phenomenon of our experience; while on the other hand, Marion reduces the gift to exclude any notion of relationality.<sup>116</sup> Both frameworks eliminate from the gift any hint of reciprocity and thus any possibility of the gift

---

112 Ibid., 263. The key difference between the two outlooks for Schmitz is that the Promethean outlook views the world solely through the lens of utility and transformation. The world as given, or self-given, can be seized and taken at a whim. He sees the classical liberal and modern revolutionary converging in this outlook. The other, begins with gratitude at a gift offered and received, and views the world as a steward, not a tyrant. See pg 269.

113 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*.

114 This is another philosophical theme for Schmitz. He writes a book exploring this theme: Kenneth Schmitz, *Recovery of Wonder: The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005).

115 It is important to note that in Schmitz's time the gift had not come under the kind of suspicion that Derrida and even Marion will put to it. Thus Schmitz's concern is not an outright defense of the gift – such a defense was not needed – but rather a widening of its application, which was desperately needed and perhaps is still needed today.

116 While this claim seems bold, this author has found no evidence where Marion discuss' the notion of the gift which include a relational element. This is not to exclude a theological understanding of the world as related, but in terms of his discussion of gifting he either removes relationality or does not make this thoughts clear, or this author has misunderstood Marion.

generating or enhancing any relationality between persons. Such reductions of the gift were precisely what Schmitz argued against in his writings. Schmitz thought that modernity had lost a sense of wonder at reality, and thus its gifted character, which was a natural result of a modern trend to see things as purely given and brute facts. A further justification of the juxtaposition of these thinkers, is that Schmitz – in classic Thomistic fashion – anticipates, albeit unknowingly, the core path that Marion would eventually take in writing on the gift.

Schmitz was adamant to overcome a vision of the world that reduces reality to givenness and the given. Schmitz characterizes the framework of givenness as a certain epistemological stance regarding the data of experience and consciousness. He thinks it is fundamentally a logical or scientific paradigm which takes the given as a starting point for future conclusions, or experimentation. “An epistemology that limits itself to data does not permit the knower to go ‘behind’ or ‘beneath’ the given in search of an ontological cause.”<sup>117</sup> Such an outlook upon the data “suggests a finished state, completed within itself.”<sup>118</sup> He traces this in the verbal tense that the verb ‘to be’ is expressed: given is a past tense and thus completed use of the verb. He notes that such “characterization of what is there as given is meant to rigorously exclude any reference to a giver.”<sup>119</sup> Because the given is a starting place, a foundation, or that which is primary, no source below the given can be admitted. Such a view may be useful – and Schmitz thinks it is – in certain fields, such as science or logic, or even a certain way of doing philosophy. However, when the given is seen as absolutely primary this excludes any possibility of a giver and thus of a

---

117 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 37.

118 Ibid.

119 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 37.

gift.<sup>120</sup> “The givenness of the given remains inviolate in such a discourse, and admits of no giver within its semantic field.”<sup>121</sup>

We can hear Marion in the above framing of givenness, both in desire to overcome transcendence and any trace of a giver, as well as the prevention of going beyond the reduced phenomenon for a metaphysical explanation. Schmitz perceptively notices that givenness, in both of the senses that he unpacks, “enjoys a certain absolution from the conditions of explanation and inference just because it lies prior to them as their starting point.”<sup>122</sup> This is exactly the claim that Marion puts forward against the critique that phenomena must succumb to the principle of sufficient reason and casual explanation.<sup>123</sup> A philosophy which limits itself to the given, cannot admit of a giver, and thus cannot admit of a gift (at least as a product of its experience). This is precisely what Derrida picks up on in Marion, and something that Schmitz anticipates and argues against.<sup>124</sup>

---

120 Marion argues for his philosophy of givenness to be understood as a first philosophy – or as a last philosophy – in the following text. Marion, “The Other First Philosophy and the Question of Givenness.”

121 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 38. Schmitz actually writes an article on the difference between semiotics or metaphysics as first philosophy in which he recognizes the benefits of postmodernism and the developments of semiotics, but he does not think this invalidates metaphysics, rather the two should mutually benefit from each other. Kenneth Schmitz, “Semiotics or Metaphysics as First Philosophy? Triadic or Dyadic Relations in Regard to ‘Four Ages of Understanding,’” *Semiotica* 179, no. 1 (2010): 119–32.

122 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 38.

123 Schmitz thinks that such conceptions of givenness have come under challenge by hermeneutics and linguistic philosophy which focus on agents – in the case of the latter – and upon interpretation in the case of the former. Either way, the phenomenon is not considered absolute, but subject to interpretation or mediation on behalf of an agent.

124 Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, 64–65. We will bring in Schmitz’s problematizing of Marion’s framework later in the paper, but it is enough to highlight how Schmitz was aware of Marion’s path, even if his writing predates Marion.

Schmitz's main philosophical drive was an interest in the concrete singular.<sup>125</sup> The gift is just such an example of a concrete singular. As a concrete singular it both admits of analysis and yet defies systemization. "To give a gift...is to embark upon an originaive activity that is radically non-systematic."<sup>126</sup> Schmitz's work will be twofold, to widen our understanding of the gift to make it predicable of more than just human interactions. Second it will be to argue that existence can justly be labeled a gift – in fact it should only be labeled as such. Our next two chapters will unfold along these lines. Chapter two will develop Schmitz's thoughts on the gift, slowly massaging the gift of our experience to make room for predication of existence. Chapter three will trace Schmitz's widening of the gift and how he argues, on the metaphysical level, for existence being seen as gifted. The gift, for Schmitz, becomes a site of disclosure upon which personalism (Schmitz' type of phenomenology) and metaphysics can encounter and mutually enrich one another.

## **2.2 Beginning with the Outside: External reality of the gift**

Schmitz defines the gift as "a free endowment upon another who receives it freely."<sup>127</sup> The first thing to notice is the external structure that the gift has: a giver, a receiver, and something endowed between them (material, immaterial or both). Schmitz calls these three pieces the 'three ontological elements' of the gift and he considers them essential to any gift process.<sup>128</sup> Take away

---

125 He labels his philosophy as the philosophy of the concrete. His thought is a blend of personalism and subjective awareness as well as metaphysical depth and rootedness. See his article: Schmitz, "Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete."

126 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 44.

127 Ibid. We shall unpack such a loaded statement like peeling an onion, pulling off one layer at a time (not to reduce), but to examine the different layers separately (remembering that each layer *enhances* our understanding of the whole).

128 Ibid., 57.

any of the three, on the ontological level, and you cannot have a gift.<sup>129</sup> These elements are not static: a gift is the result of an action, and thus always has an origin and a destination. To say that something is a gift, implies that such an action has taken place. Thus for Schmitz the gift always “points beyond itself to its source, to a more or less definitively apprehended giver.”<sup>130</sup> Where there is a gift, there must have been a giver and an intended receiver. Schmitz’s framework of the gift reveals a structure as well as a dynamism: as structure there are three pieces, and as dynamism, a gift results from an action and a relation between two parties.

A logical corollary, on the external level, is that a gift can never be self-given.<sup>131</sup> A reason for this, on the external level, is that a gift comes from outside, from another, and is endowed by that other.<sup>132</sup> A further justification against self-giving is experience and intuition. Schmitz argues that there is something inherent to the language of gift and giftedness that points to something coming from without – without one’s own agency. Despite the similarity in words, we mean something qualitatively different when we say ‘I gave this to myself’, and ‘I was given this by another.’ The former phrase is a cheap imitation of the later. It is a cheap imitation precisely because it is self-referential and non-relational. Gifting, for Schmitz is a moving out, not a turning inward. This moving out has a terminus point which completes the gift.

---

129 Schmitz realizes that on the epistemological level one of the pieces of the gift may be unknown, but this does not remove its necessity on the ontological level. A giver may be unknown to a recipient, but not unnecessary. A recipient may not be known exactly (as in a will to a child not yet born), but a receiver is necessary and intended. We shall discuss this point further in chapter 4 when contrast it with Marion.

130 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 44.

131 Ibid., 43. “We can’t really give anything to ourselves. If the gift is wholly in our command and within our power, it is not in any strict sense a gift.” For Schmitz a self-gift is possible as long as it is a giving of self to another. But a gift that is given to oneself by oneself is no gift. Schmitz thinks Hegel ushers in this vision of reality, and when the transcendent is cut off after Hegel, self-giving becomes self-referential and thus closes off any avenue to be seen as the gift.

132 There is an internal reason why something that is a gift cannot be self-given which we shall touch upon in the next section.

Schmitz argues that “a gift is meant to be reciprocated.”<sup>133</sup> For a gift to be a full gift, Schmitz argues that it must not only be given, but it must be received.<sup>134</sup> This is not to imply that all gifts are accepted; rather it means for a gift to reach the fullest meaning of a gift, it must be received.<sup>135</sup> Such reciprocation is not a return for a gift given, but “rather the completion of the gift being given.”<sup>136</sup> The gift is completed in its reception, not in any return gift made.<sup>137</sup> Thus an image that encapsulates Schmitz’s framework is a semi-circle.<sup>138</sup> Schmitz is comfortable calling such reception, reciprocation; yet he understands this reciprocation in a focused way. Schmitz conceives of the primary reception of a gift, that which brings a gift to fulfillment and maturity, along the lines of what Gabriel Marcel understood by receptivity.<sup>139</sup>

Schmitz does not want his reader to think that receptivity is a type of inert passivity. Schmitz thinks receptivity can be understood in one of two senses: passive and active. The passive form is that which is proper to physical matter – as when a tree receives a blow from an ax, or a gentle breeze. The tree is passive to this type of action and receives it without any active

---

133 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 47.

134 In this he and Marion will be in agreement – as Marion posits that there must be a receiver for a gift to be complete. Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. See Final Chapter.

135 A gift can be offered and rejected, and still retain a partial quality of being a gift, yet it is not a gift in the fullest sense. “If a gift is to reach its maturity, true to type, then it needs to be received with gratitude, and not compensated for by a return gift.” Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 51.

136 *Ibid.*, 47.

137 This is an important point for Schmitz and for us, since it anticipates one of the central objections of both Marion and Derrida against the common conception of the gift, which Schmitz is attempting to nuance and explain.

138 This is in direct contrast with Derrida who posits a circle and thus a certain conception of reciprocity that Schmitz denies. A semi-circle better grasps what Schmitz is pointing toward.

139 Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, Gifford Lectures 1 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), 242–270.



agency.<sup>140</sup> Schmitz thinks that this type of receptivity is proper to matter. The receptivity proper to spiritual beings, who are more than just matter, is the active kind outlined by Gabriel Marcel.

Marcel speaks of a receptivity under the analogy of a host receiving a guest.<sup>141</sup> For a guest to be received well into one's home, there is a certain level of activity and agency on behalf of the host that is required. Such activity has the goal of making the guest feel welcome and 'at home.' This type of receptivity is 'attentive' and 'active,' yet it is still a receptivity in that it must await, or stand in need of, the agency of another. We might also think of reception along the lines of a receptionist, who waits for a client or an encounter, and then seeks – to the best of his ability – to respond and fulfill the needs of the client. This is the type of receptivity that Schmitz argues for when he says that a gift demands reciprocity, which is nothing less than active receptivity which brings the gift to completion. Gratuitous endowment “alone does not realize the gift;” active reception is the other key component to the gift.<sup>142</sup> This view of receptivity carries with it a risk, because to truly be receptive is to open one up to the significance of the gift.<sup>143</sup>

Schmitz's principle of reciprocity does not annul the possibility of the receiver offering a gift in return. When gifts flow in both directions this reveals a fecund relationship between giver and receiver and a mutual affection between the two. What is important for Schmitz is that such an action is not a *quid pro quo*, rather it initiates a “fresh act of giving into the relationship.”<sup>144</sup> He is not ignorant that such a return gift may be generated in response to the first gift received, thus we

---

140 The example that Schmitz uses is that of a piece of wax receiving an imprint. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 53.

141 Ibid, 47.

142 Ibid.

143 We will pick up on this theme in the following section.

144 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 52. This is not to suggest that people never give *quid pro quo* gifts. But merely to highlight that such exchanges are not properly gifts as Schmitz understands them.

may even loosely call this a return gift. Yet the return is no payment, or a settling of debts – like in an economic exchange – rather it is a new initiative that reveals a fruitful relationship. With an economic model, an exchange is predicated upon equality and a mutually agreed upon standard of value. It is a ‘this’ for ‘that’ which have equal agreed upon value. A gift exchange, in its fullest sense, has no agreed upon equity or value. It is two separate gifts, endowed to express a “mutual affection and respect within which both parties are at once receivers and givers to each other.”<sup>145</sup> While “gifts cannot be returned, they can make possible a gift in return.”<sup>146</sup> The gift has a fecundity which is generative, thus reciprocity is natural within human interactions of gifting, yet such reciprocity, Schmitz argues, is not on the level of exchange that Derrida or Marion feared.<sup>147</sup>

The two components of the gift on the external level are the ontological structure of giver, gift and receiver, as well as the double act of offering and receiving that animates and completes a single gifted event. Yet, such external description cannot be the full characterization of the gift, for there is an inherent opacity and ambiguity in a seemingly basic action. Schmitz is aware of such messiness in his analysis. He attempts to define what a gift is theoretically, without cutting it off from how it manifests in experience, thus letting his experience shape and inform his philosophical understanding. He notices that, experientially, determining when an offering is actually a gift admits of a far higher degree of uncertainty than the clear framework that

---

145 Ibid.

146 Ibid.

147 This is an important point for Schmitz and for us, since it anticipates one of the central objections of both Marion and Derrida against the common conception of the gift, which Schmitz is attempting to nuance and explain. I can pay for a doctor’s service based on a monetary value. Such an exchange is economic. The doctor, can, visit my house and offer me a free service which is gratuitous. I receive this gift by accepting his service and advice with diligence. However, I may also choose to make a return gift of – a meal for his family. This is a sign of my gratitude and not a payment of an agreed upon amount between the two of us like in economics. Such mutual giving is not of the same paradigm as economics.

intellectual words can paint. For example, there are presents, gifts, bribes, and favors, which all seem to have a similar external form – the free exchange of something between two people – and yet we distinguish, even linguistically, between these encounters with similar external structures.

The gift is not merely a definition, or an external action, encounter, or event. “The gift rests in a domain of significance that is charged with discontinuity and contingency, with risk, vulnerability and surprise.”<sup>148</sup> Such a domain admits of gradation, and not static rigidity. As he says, “we ought not to expect to find in the concrete and actual human situation pure interactions of giving and receiving unmixed with other qualities and intentions.”<sup>149</sup> Unlike for Derrida, who conceives of a gift as a bullseye on a target which is narrow, confined and requires extreme skill to hit; Schmitz conceives of the gift as the target itself with both a bullseye as well as the surrounding rings, which may not be perfect gifts, yet still retain a gifted character.<sup>150</sup> Thus he writes “the line between a gift and a transaction...is eidetically clear enough, but it is not always clear in life itself, nor should we expect it to be.”<sup>151</sup> Such messiness, for Schmitz, reveals not an inherent aporia of the gift, but rather that the gift admits of an internal depth in addition to its external breadth.<sup>152</sup> Schmitz is flagging here an epistemological problem which leads to a

---

148 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 45.

149 Ibid.

150 Here there may be echoes of Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblances. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009). Schmitz’s framework of the gift admits of analogy and thus of a scale of perfection or gradation.

151 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 45.

152 Ibid., 46. To the extent that presents are obligatory or expected, “they ‘fall away’ from and “do not realize the fullest possibility of the gift.” Why? Because the principle of gratuity is not fully operative. Presents are not relegated to an economic transaction, yet neither do they deserve the proper title of a gift, since they are tinged with social duty. Yet Schmitz thinks that presents can rise to the level of gifts, if they are imbued with a gratuity that goes above and beyond what is obligated. As when on Valentine’s Day I gave someone her favorite flower, instead of any flower. Thus a gift, for Schmitz, seems to be like a precious stone for Schmitz. There is a minimum standard, without which there is no precious stone. A stone’s value can be increased or decreased depending upon polish, cut, and its own natural condition etc.

metaphysical realization. ‘How are you to know if this free offering is actually a gift?’ To answer such a question, Schmitz thinks the gift must be rooted in an interiority beyond that of mere experience or external appearance. The gift *possesses* both an interior constitution as well as an analogous character.

### 2.3 Interiority of the Gift – its distinctive features.

Let us recall our working definition of a gift as “a free endowment upon another who receives it freely.”<sup>153</sup> The central interior quality that reveals itself from this is that of gratuity. Schmitz definition stresses gratuity as an essential trait – *the unique trait* – of the gift. It is the “first mark of the gift” and it constitutes it inherently.<sup>154</sup> For Schmitz, this trait is the *sine qua non* regarding the gift. It will be his fulcrum, what distinguishes the gift interiorly, as well as the root of its analogous expression.<sup>155</sup> The gratuity is of a double character: both the receiver and the giver must be free if a gift is to occur.

As to the giver, the gratuity manifests in not having an obligation to give, or in one who gives beyond obligation.<sup>156</sup> The giver must not be compelled or obligated to offer this gift to this recipient. Neither can the giver obligate or coerce a response on behalf of the receiver. The giver must offer his gift, and wait – respecting the integrity of the receiver. Further, this principle of gratuity, operates within the gift itself, by forbidding the gift from being taken back by the giver if it is not claimed, if it is rejected, or if it is misused by the recipient.

---

153 Ibid., 44.

154 Ibid. See the above example regarding presents and gifts. This internal quality will be central for Schmitz and will distinguish him from Marion. His analogous predication will distinguish him from Derrida.

155 This is my reading of his understanding of both the messiness of the gift as well as how the gift exists in real life as a concrete singular.

156 See the example above regarding presents and gifts. Presents can be transformed into gifts if one goes above and beyond cultural obligation to give, thus endowing the gift with the needed gratuity.

Gratuity also operates on the side of the recipient. What is offered to the recipient is offered without his request or without his merit. The recipient must await the initiative of the giver, and his choice is whether or not to receive what has been offered. He must not be under any obligation to accept what is offered. The gratuity of the receiver manifests in the freedom to accept or reject the gift that is offered. Thus there is both a subjective and an objective reality within the gift. The subjective reality is that the gift must await the subjective endowment and reception needed to initiate and complete the gift. The objective reality is in each party respecting and awaiting the free action of the other.

The unconditional character of the gift, for Schmitz, is located in gratuity: both on the side of the giver and on the side of the receiver. For something to be a gift, there must be no obligation to give on behalf of the giver, no merit on behalf of the receiver, and no obligation on behalf of the receiver to receive it. Further, the gift once offered, cannot be taken back pending a certain response. Once it is offered, it is offered regardless of whether it is accepted, rejected, or used well. The offer is unconditional. However, Schmitz does not understand this unconditional character to exclude expectation or obligation.<sup>157</sup>

The unconditional gratuity of the gift revolves around the double sided notion of receptivity, not on whether there are obligations or not. A gift is something that is given by a giver to a receiver. As such, a gift can be, and often is, given with a purpose or intention of the giver for the recipient. Full receptivity, of the recipient, can entail that the recipient responds to the ways that the gift demands. Thus giving and receiving is a risk. The giver, in giving, opens himself up to

---

<sup>157</sup> The unconditional character of the gift does not prevent a giver having expectations or intentions behind the giving of the gift, nor does it prevent the gift from needing a certain type of response to be fulfilled; nor does it prevent the receiver from freely entering into the call of the giver and the gift, if he chooses to receive the gift. In other words, a gift can be laden with expectation, meaning, even obligation, yet such obligations must be accepted and fulfilled by the receiver freely if the gift is to retain its character.

the risk of having his gift rejected and misused; while the receiver, in receiving, opens himself up to receiving the gift as its demands. “In reception the receiver opens himself up to the intention of the giver and to the significance of the gift.”<sup>158</sup> In other words, a gift can entail mutual obligations between a giver and a receiver, as long as each party retains their freedom to enter into such a relationship. A gift’s gratuity does not rule out any obligations being taken up by giver or receiver, rather the principle of gratuity respects the freedom for such obligations to be entered into or rejected.

We might think of the gift of one’s hand in marriage. This is offered and accepted freely, but once done, such a gift (albeit an especially unique gift) entails fidelity between each of the partners. This entailment is not the logical entailment of a conclusion that stems from a statement, but rather it is an entailment that must constantly be chosen, thus there is an evanescent presence of gratuity in such a relationship.

We might also look at the case of a parent and a child to underscore how Schmitz conceives of the unconditional character of the gift. The child does not merit such love, and can even reject such love, yet the parent offers the love not because the child has done something to earn it, but because of who the parent is, and what the child means to the parent. Even if the child never loves the parent in return, the parent will go on loving the child (if the love is unconditional), because the parent’s love is not predicated upon the child’s actions, but something deeper. Such an offering of love is unconditional because it does not oblige a return, nor is it predicated on any merit in the receiver. Yet such unconditional love, can be laden with conditions on another level.

A parent, while loving unconditionally, can certainly desire for the child to receive their love, and even to love in return. While this may not be properly called a condition, like a contract, it is

---

<sup>158</sup> Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 49.

certainly an expectation and a hope on behalf of the parent. The same goes for a giver who offers something to a receiver. There is an expectation and a hope that such a gift will be accepted, and even used for the purposes intended by the giver. The gift can be laden with these kinds of expectations. Does this violate the unconditional trait of the gift? Schmitz thinks it does not, so long as the giver, awaits and respects the decision of the receiver to accept or reject what is offered.<sup>159</sup> This is the objective interior component of the gift – will the giver take the risk of offering and then waiting the response of the receiver, even if that response may be a rejection or a misuse of the gift that is offered.

There are less weighty examples of the fulfillment that receptivity reveals, besides marital or parental love. For example, a gift of food is intended to be eaten. Thus, when it is well received, it is brought to fulfillment through gratitude and the receiver actually eating the food. To receive with gratitude and then to throw away, is – in some sense – to have not brought the gift to its proper fulfillment. Another example is the gift of a musical instrument. If the receiver accepts the gift, there is a call – within that gift – for the receiver to learn how to play. If the instrument is received and then never played, the gift itself of the instrument is not brought to fulfillment. Within every gift, offered freely, is a call to bring the gift to its proper fulfillment through reception and use.<sup>160</sup> Thus a gift is not a static thing, but it is offered with purpose, and if it is accepted, this purpose calls for a response on behalf of the receiver. Schmitz thinks that obligations may be present within a gift, but what must be unconditional is the freedom with

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 85–87.

<sup>160</sup> Milbank, “Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic,” 135. Milbank agrees with Schmitz on this point of how gifts can entail obligation and yet still be gratuitous.

which both parties offer and receive the gift and the relationship.<sup>161</sup> Thus gratuity and receptivity introduce a principle of risk and vulnerability into the gift.

Because of this mutual gratuity demanded by the gift, such a process is inherently risky.<sup>162</sup> On behalf of the giver, a gift can be rejected, spurned, ignored, or misused; on behalf of the receiver a gift received enters one into a relationship with the giver and the gift that could be risky and even demanding. The risk, inherent within the gift, is deepened because what is essentially offered – through a gift – is part of the person himself. This is another example of the interior character of the gift which is manifested in Schmitz's definition as endowment.

The gifting process originates with a giver who endows something – the gift – for someone – the recipient. This endowment is a central notion for Schmitz. This endowment marks the gift in its radical singularity, unrepeatability and its personal or relational quality. What is offered in a gift is no mere object, but also part of oneself. Schmitz argues that “the giver does not hand over something ‘outside’ of himself, but under his control; rather, he builds up the thing into a gift by loaning it his own conscious intention as he attends to the receiver.”<sup>163</sup> In any true gift, any gift subject to the traits we have been attempting to outline, the giver gives not just a thing, but a part of himself. The giver endows the gift, thus transforming it from mere object to something intimate and personal. It is not just a token of him, but it has been infused with a part of himself.<sup>164</sup> Such a personal endowment marks the gift as truly unreturnable, unrepeatably, concrete and singular.

---

161 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 51.

162 *Ibid.*, 47.

163 *Ibid.*, 59.

164 *Ibid.*



This personal endowment marks the gift and makes each gift exchange radically personal and concrete and thus unreturnable. “Reciprocity is called for as in the reception of every gift; but a straightforward reciprocal relation is impossible.”<sup>165</sup> The reason for this is that, giving and receiving is “an existential relation” between this particular giver and this particular recipient.<sup>166</sup> A gift is a radically unique event because it is infused with the personal quality of the giver, and given in an existentially unique way – to *this* recipient at *this* time. As such, no gift can ever be returned, *per se*, because no receiver can ever give what the giver offers – which is himself in relationship.<sup>167</sup> If the receiver attempts to make a return of a gift, what is returned is not an exchange for the gift, but a new gift process. The receiver cannot return the gift, because he is unable to reconstitute the conditions of the initial gift. This giver, gives to this receiver in a way proper to the giver. Either the gift is received and fulfilled or it is rejected, it can never be repaid analogous to a settling of accounts.<sup>168</sup> Seen on an interior level, what is given is not a detachable object, but a portion of the giver, that can never be reciprocated identically. An example is that of a mother’s love to a son. A son can never return such a love, because he is not a mother – he can receive her love and offer a son’s love – as a new gift – but he cannot return a mother’s love to

---

165 Ibid., 54.

166 Ibid., 55.

167 If fact when a gift is returned – literally – the gift is rejected. As when I give back a pair of boots to the person who offered them to me, because I do think it was an inappropriate gift and attempts to engender a relationship that I do not want.

168 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 55. Here Schmitz responds to the framework of Marion. Schmitz argues that gifts can be given anonymously and yet still remain fundamentally an existential relation between this giver and this recipient. “The uniqueness of the giver, that is, that he or they be actually existent individuals or groups, is an ontological condition, required by the actual relationship of endowment that constitutes giving and receiving; whereas the anonymity of most donors to their recipients is an epistemological condition.” Marion claims that a gift can exist without the ontological conditions of a giver, whereas Schmitz denies this. The anonymity of a donor exists only on the epistemic realm for Schmitz never on the ontological realm. A gift cannot occur without a donor. Yet anonymity can exist on the part of the donor without annulling the gift.

her.<sup>169</sup> The personal endowment of the gift by the giver, makes it unique, as well as allows for the possibility of a unique type of gift exchange.

The interior depth that the gift possesses, is grounded in its gratuity, individual endowment, and concrete existential nature which makes it radically singular and unrepeatable. Such interior qualities distinguish the gift from other scenario's that mimic its external form – like bribes, favors, and presents. How have these interior conditions helped Schmitz to answer the epistemic question: how one is to know when a gift has been given – i.e. fulfils its conditions? Further, our interior unpacking of the gift, begs the question of how Schmitz can coherently apply the gift to such a diversity of situations without running into contradictions or univocal predication of the gift. We shall treat the latter question first. Schmitz framework thus reveals the analogous character of the gift.

## 2.4 Analogy of the Gift

Our discussion has been treating of gifts that entail relationships: love, family, friendship etc. What about those gifts that seem to entail no such thing: giving a coin to a beggar on the street, or volunteering on a help hotline and speaking with people for a brief amount of time? Can these situations meet the criterion of gratuity and relationality that Schmitz posits? In other words, does all gifting entail relationality? If I walk by someone and toss some money into his cup, does this constitute a gift? It is free and I expect nothing in return. It fulfils the principle of gratuity, as well as the ontological structure of giver, something given, and recipient. Let us further posit that the beggar receives the coin in gratitude and buys something legitimate with it – thus bringing it to fulfilment. Yet there seems to be no relationship offered or received. What happens to

---

169 Ibid., 54. But even the simple gift of an apple to a friend, is not constituted by the apple alone, and thus a gift can be simple, and yet be unrepeatable and also no gift that is returned can ever be a mere exchange for what was offered.

relationality here?<sup>170</sup> Has the relational quality, which Schmitz has emphasized, suddenly become ancillary? Is the offering of money also the offering of a relationship to the beggar? What interiority does such a gift possess? In other words, are there some gifts that do not entail relationships, or is relationality inherent to the gift? The answer centers on endowment and gradation understood along an analogous framework.

Schmitz's examples were produced from rather serious or deeply entwined relationships (marriage, family, true friendships etc.). Yet these are not the only types of relationships that exist. There are also acquaintances and social friendship such as those with your barber, or mechanic etc. Gifts given, within such contexts, do not need to be predicated upon a profound relationship, nor seek to develop one – but if a gift is offered, a relationship exists or is opened.<sup>171</sup> There can be small gifts and small relationships, just as there can be large gifts and large relationships. Thus, in the context of the beggar, a relationship is opened with the offering of a donation, if it is offered as a gift and not out of guilt, or obligation. An offering of a gift is an encounter and, as such, is a type of relationship, a type of being in relation with. Such an encounter can be deep, or shallow, and to the extent that it is deep it becomes a more meaningful gift.<sup>172</sup> But even the shallow gifts are gifts none the less and are moments of encounter and presence between two parties (singular or plural). Such a situation reveals an analogous use of the word gift.

---

170 This example was chosen based on Derrida's example of a false gift between a beggar and a gentlemen passing by. Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 31–33.

171 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 49.

172 It is precisely this trait that is the source of joy and anxiety in close relationships. When a close relationship is met by a gift that has little endowment, the other party wonders about the status of their relationship. Further, when a gift that is offered matches or exceeds the relationship, there is joy at the realization of the mutual affections between individuals.

Schmitz's rich analysis of the gift points to its analogous character. Analogy, as a philosophical term, was first explained by Aristotle.<sup>173</sup> Aristotle noticed that some words are used in neither an equivocal nor univocal way. As such they had a diversity of uses, but are rooted in a common meaning or purpose. His example was health. A healthy corporation, a healthy person and healthy food, are all used in equivocal ways yet, are rooted in a univocal meaning – health as the proper functioning of the entity in question. Aquinas picks up – and develops – the value of analogy especially in reference to the theological discipline and how we are able to speak about and come to know things about God. Analogies contain a principle of identity within their diverse expressions.<sup>174</sup> Or as Schmitz understands analogy, it is a “relation of diversity, between singular referents and ultimately between the finitude of creatures and the infinitude of God.”<sup>175</sup> Thus analogy is grounded in a principle of unity as well as points towards a principle of diversity. The gift seems to be understood in such a way by Schmitz.<sup>176</sup>

His principle of identity within the gift is that of gratuity. Where there is no gratuity there can be no gift. Yet such gratuity can manifest itself in a variety of ways, thus there can be a

173 Aristotle, *Aristotle Selected Works*, trans. Hippocrates Apostle and Lloyd Gerson, 3rd ed. (Grinnell, Iowa: Peripatetic Press, 1991), 362-365. *Metaphysics*, Book IV Chapter II.

174 S.T. I.13.5&6. Aquinas thought that analogy was an important notion in order to be able to predicate things of God. He goes beyond Aristotle's understanding because analogy in Aristotle's understanding was understood in terms of predication and not necessarily in terms of causation. Whereas for Aquinas, analogy has other expressions such as that of causation. For example, healthy can be predicated of a body's urine and that same body analogously because healthy urine is a sign of a healthy body. But healthy can also be predicated of medicine and a body because medicine is the cause of health in that body. In this latter sense there is an intrinsic causal relation between healthy medicine and healthy body that does not hold in the urine and body example. Schmitz understands analogy according to the more developed notion of Aquinas. Existence is understood to be analogous in the sense of Aquinas internal and causal notion of analogy – an analogy of participation or perfection. The analogy of giftedness seems to have a more extrinsic relation and thus is used in the Aristotelian sense like an analogy of attribution. For a more detailed discussion of the scholastic understanding of analogy See Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 256.

175 Schmitz, “Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition,” 251. He writes that analogy was recovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a rejection of Hegelian dialectic. Analogy, has a positive and negative dimension: it is both a relation of unity within diversity as well as a recognition of the dissimilarity present between singular referents. “For analogy is not, after all, a relation of identity leading to totalism, nor one of difference leading to the failure of rational unity, but a relation of diversity, between singular referents and ultimately between the finitude of creatures and the infinitude of God.”

variety of gifts. On one end of the scale you have the brief encounter with the beggar which is a gratuitous encounter and thus is a gift, yet it entails very little involvement between both parties. On the upper ends of the human scale you have something like marriage, where you also have gratuity and thus a gift, and yet the relationality is quite extensive: ‘til death do us part.’ On the face of it, these two gifts are radically different. Yet Schmitz wants us to notice the principle of gratuity that roots them in a common – yet analogous – framework. It is precisely this analogous framework that will allow Schmitz to pivot and to widen the gift to include interactions between the divine and the human. It seems that Derrida’s framework, without a notion of analogy, is unable to conceive of the gift such that it could become a datum of our experience.<sup>177</sup>

Some scholars do not look kindly upon Schmitz’s flexible and analogous gift framework. Mark Manolopoulos thinks that Schmitz supposed flexibility is really an implicit acknowledgement of the tensions within the gift, and a poor attempt to skirt there real irresolvable bite.<sup>178</sup> Manolopoulos argues that Schmitz analysis of the gift never escapes from Derrida’s claim that a gift aspires – nay needs to be – unconditional, nevertheless it always “bends back, returns, circulates” and thus never escapes an economic cycle.<sup>179</sup> Further, Manolopoulos thinks Schmitz is oddly unconcerned, or untroubled, by the tensions that arise in

---

176 This is my interpretation of Schmitz. See also: Oliva Blanchette, *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 116–118. Blanchette discuss the role of analogy in metaphysics as something essential. He distinguishes the various roles analogy plays in other disciplines, poetic, empirical sciences etc. “In metaphysics, analogy is access to being as being in the originality of its differences.”

177 Schmitz, “The God of Love,” 503. As Schmitz writes “It seems to me that every philosophy that raises difference to such an absolute status, whether it be Heidegger’s, Derrida’s, or Marion’s, must deny analogy.” Thus a main problematic for Schmitz with both Derrida, and Marion is the lack of analogy in their understanding of reality. Schmitz will further stress the importance of analogy when he discusses receptivity in creatures (282 same article). Schmitz thinks that a key difference between his thought and Derrida’s is that he conceives of the gift along the lines of love, whereas Derrida is only able to think of it within a power-framework: “the self-destruction of the gift would indeed occur if all relationships were power-relations” (288).

178 Mark Manolopoulos, *If Creation Is a Gift* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 40–41.

179 Ibid., 41.

trying to speak of and conceptualize the gift; Schmitz's division between concept and reality do not do justice to later objections against the gift.<sup>180</sup> In other words, Manolopoulos thinks that Schmitz is not able to deliver a conception of the gift that is outside of an economic paradigm of exchange, and he repeats Derrida's claim that even gratitude is a type of exchange and thus would invalidate any gift.<sup>181</sup>

Manolopoulos' critique balances upon the fulcrum of what unconditional means in respect to the gift. Unconditional, for him, as well as for Derrida, is such that neither a giver nor a gift can have any intentionality, purpose, or meaning which the receiver must respond to. Yet unconditional in such a sense is only possible if humans (or God) were machines, without desires, emotions, and intelligibility. Schmitz proffers another understanding of unconditional, as well as a different take on reciprocity, which are his pathways out of the aporias of Manolopoulos and Derrida. Such a path rests upon his conception of reciprocity, the unconditional character and double sided notion of gratuity.<sup>182</sup>

## 2.5 Contrast and Conclusion

Schmitz's take on reciprocity anticipates the central objection by both Derrida and Marion. They argue that any reciprocity will negate the gift, because it will either make the gift a product of exchange or infringe upon its gratuity. He responds by walking a tight line – which may seem contradictory, but is profound. He argues that since every act of giving is unique, in that the giver endows it with a personal quality that a receiver cannot return, there is a certain non-

---

180 Ibid., 40.

181 Ibid., 42.

182 To be clear Manolopoulos does not despair of the gift like Derrida. Rather, he thinks that it is ineluctably situated within opposing poles of exchange and excess. As such the proper response is one of oscillation between celebration and use (respecting the gratuity pole) and gratitude and care (respecting the exchange pole). Manolopoulos, "Derrida's Gift to Eco/Theo/Logy: A Critical Tribute," 63–66.

reciprocation and asymmetry in every gift. A gift terminates in the reception of the receiver. Yet, at the same time, the reception of the gift, is a type of reciprocity in which the receiver can accept and fulfil the gift even accepting the intentions of the giver and significance of the gift. Further, a recipient can offer a new gift, which acknowledges the relationship with the giver. Derrida's worry of an exchange is avoided, because there is no exchange, but a response. An exchange, understood economically, is based on an equivalence of value – thus there are two goods exchanged of equal value. A gift merits a response, which is not based on an equivalence of value, but on an acknowledgement of what has been offered: a relationship. The personal and relation qualities inherent to Schmitz's conception of the gift prevent an understanding of reciprocity according to an economic model like that of Marion and Derrida. Further, one must ask, why Derrida sets the bar of a non-reciprocal event so high. This certainly does not come from experience, since our common encounter with the gift in experience is tinged with reciprocal and counter gifting. We shall pick up this question in chapter four. For now we will focus on a point of positive contact between the two.

Schmitz's discussion of interiority reveal a point of contact between himself and Derrida. Derrida argued that a gift, even if it did happen, could not be known; as soon as it was known, it would be annulled. Schmitz will not go as far as Derrida, but does acknowledge that a particular free offering can have the appearance of a gift, but one may not know it as such right away. This is the murky or opaque element surrounding any gift exchange. Where does such opacity and ambiguity reside? Is it in the gift itself or somewhere else? Schmitz thinks it resides in both – especially when the gift has a significant material value.<sup>183</sup> For example the more expensive the gift, the harder it is to give and receive gratuitously. This is evidenced by people returning gifts

---

<sup>183</sup> Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 50.

they feel are too expensive for a particular occasion. Such a return, is a rejection of the type of relationship they suspect the gift to have been entangled within. This reveals that the primary ambiguity surrounding the gift resides in the interior conditions of the gift – especially those of gratuity. For something to be a gift, it must be offered with gratuity and accepted with gratuity. This is simple enough. It becomes more complex when we ask ‘how do you know what has been given is really a gift?’ In order to satisfy this question one would need to know the intentionality of the giver, or of the receiver – was the gift offered or accepted in gratuity? One does not always know.

Let us take the example of a bribe. Something may be given which seems like a gift, but in actuality is a bribe. A bribe is not a gift, but a down-payment in anticipation of a certain response. It is the offering a relationship that is coercive and usually illegal and physically binding.<sup>184</sup> Even though this appears to be a gift, it fails in its requirement of gratuity, and thus despite its outward appearance, it is not actually a gift. Discerning, in reality, when a gift has actually been offered is not always clear. Yet Schmitz does not think it is impossible:

many concrete situations remain obscure, even to the parties involved. The ambiguity in an interchange of gifts may remain until some unequivocal act of generosity breaks through and declares the inherently free character...or until an equally unequivocal act announces by a negative freedom the deliberate refusal to take up the relationship intended by the gift.<sup>185</sup>

Thus for Schmitz, it may be difficult to know if what has been given or received is actually a gift, but it is never impossible, for the free character (if it is a gift) will manifest itself eventually.

Thus a bribe will reveal itself, as such, if the anticipated response does not happen. What had

---

184 Derrida’s example in *Given Time* is a counterfeit gift – when a man gives a fake coin to a beggar. This appears to be a gift, but it is really a joke – a cruel one at that. The interior conditions of the gift were not fulfilled and thus there was no gift. Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, 33.

185 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 51.



been offered ‘freely’ will need to be settled like a debt. Conversely, the gift, will be removed from its ambiguity, when its gratuitous character is confirmed by the giver at a later point.

Schmitz and Derrida have their fingers on the same pulse of the gift – its interior dimension that makes a true gift difficult to discern – but Schmitz’s framework and grasp of the gift offers a way forward past Derrida’s aporias. We will now turn to see how Schmitz widens the gift beyond human interactions and goes on to predicate the gift of existence.

### Chapter Three – Gifted Existence?

We opened our paper by discussing the perennial wrinkle existence has been for philosophers over the centuries. Due to its concrete nature, it cannot be abstracted and circumscribed by a philosophical concept. It is not that existence can ever be denied, *per se*, rather what is debatable is how one is to understand the fact of existence. This can be framed, classically, in the question ‘why there is something rather than nothing?’ The philosopher, who inevitably wonders at this question, is faced with the problem of existence – unable to be ignored, it gnaws away until it is reckoned with. Gabriel Marcel reframed this question by posing a distinction between a problem and a mystery.<sup>186</sup> For Marcel, a problem was something that was exterior to a subject, whereas a mystery was something that a subject was involved with from within.<sup>187</sup>

---

<sup>186</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, 243. Marcel was a philosopher that Schmitz drew heavily from in his own intellectual formation and thought. He was clued into the same issue regarding existence not being able to be seen as a gift.

<sup>187</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, 251 & 260. For example, a character in a story, versus the reader of the story. The character is within the story, whereas the reader is outside the story. For the reader, the story can pose a problem, even be a problem, but for the character the story cannot be merely a problem, it is also a mystery.

Now existence is clearly that which we are involved with from within. We are not able to ‘get outside of’ existence. Thus Marcel’s analysis moves us away from seeing existence as a problem, towards viewing it as a mystery. Thus the philosopher, thinking with Marcel, is faced with the mystery of existence.<sup>188</sup> A problem can be solved and moved beyond, a mystery can be entered into, and lived, but never gotten beyond. Gilson highlights this mysterious character of existence for philosophers; for since existence is radically singular and actual it can never be abstracted.<sup>189</sup> This poses a problem for the philosopher who seeks to know through abstracting – yet encounters an aspect of reality that cannot be abstracted.<sup>190</sup> Marcel’s reframing of the question invites the philosopher not to see existence as a problem, but as a mystery – one which can be investigated and reflected upon, but one which will never be solved or completed.<sup>191</sup> Existence as mystery, opens one up to a wonder which does not cease, but grows and deepens as the mystery is entered into ever more deeply.

While framing the question of existence under the lens of mystery helps to introduce a sense of humility into our investigation, it does not answer how existence is best to be understood: as a burden, as meaningless, or as purposeful. Can an interpretation of existence only be adjudicated through hermeneutics? Is there any philosophical position that can push the

---

188 Mystery here does not connote the sense of a mystery novel or detective story. For here mystery seems to represent more of a problem, it comes very close to being identical with a problem. But a problem can be solved and moved past, like when you finish the mystery novel and move onto another book – satisfied that you have solved the case. Yet mystery, in the sense that Marcel is intending it, does not seek for a solution which allows one to move beyond it, rather it is a reality that invites wonder that is not exhaustible but which deepens. Like the mystery of friendship. A true friendship is never something that one can fully understand, but only be drawn deeper into. Nor is a true friendship something one ever moves beyond, but rather one deepens and grows the friendship which is always being enriched yet never exhausted.

189 Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 193. “It is unpleasant for philosophy to admit that it flows from a source which, qua source, will never become an object of abstract representation.”

190 The same holds true of the individual, who – as radically singular – cannot be abstracted. Schmitz reflects on this existential peculiarity in his article: Kenneth Schmitz, “Enriching the Copula,” in *Texture of Being: Essays in First Philosophy*, ed. Paul O’Herron (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

191 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 129. Schmitz refers directly to Marcel here.

needle toward a better or worse characterization of existence between the three fundamental options: brute fact, humiliating burden, or radical gift?<sup>192</sup> Schmitz thought so. But in order to do so Schmitz thought one had to make an appeal to metaphysics, or to move beyond mere appearance.<sup>193</sup> Drawing on Aquinas, and his fundamental distinction between essence and existence, Schmitz thought that existence could not be described as a brute fact, because existence was an act and an act that possessed intentionality not mere factuality. Drawing on Anselm, he thought that existence escaped the description of humiliating burden because such a view of existence misses the radical nature of what is offered. This left him with the conclusion that existence was best understood as a radical gift: the primary radical gift. A metaphysics of the gift is a metaphysics that argues for act being that which is more primary than potency in being, and posits creatures as essentially receptive beings. This chapter seeks to unfold Schmitz's thoughts on this metaphysical distinction between essence and existence, and will conclude with Schmitz's argument for how the category of the gift can be widened to include interactions between the divine and the human – which includes that of existence. In the end, however, a metaphysics of the gift, is not a result of mere argumentation, but also of a certain way of seeing.<sup>194</sup>

### 3.1 Aquinas's Distinction

---

192 Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, 243. He is clued into the same reality as Schmitz. He argues that it is growing increasingly harder for people to see life as a gift, not just because of a lack of faith, but because life is often experienced to be hard, difficult and – at times – meaningless.

193 This is another difference between him, Marion and Derrida. Schmitz thought metaphysics had a valid role to play in philosophical investigation, whereas the other two did not.

194 Schmitz's argument is made in a way that is distinct from logical certainty or philosophical demonstration (i.e. finding and arguing from the middle term). However, his argument seems distinct from Marion's in that Schmitz's framework attempts to argue (to give reasons for) why a vision of the world as gifted is not just based upon one's experience but on how reality actually is. Yet it is considered a 'way of seeing' because other interpretations are logically possible and coherent, thus Schmitz's position must be 'seen' and not just accepted intellectually.

Toward the end of his text on the gift, Schmitz writes that it is Aquinas who sheds light upon the central gift at the heart of reality – that of existence.<sup>195</sup> His chapter is crafted around a comparisons between Hegel’s and Aquinas’ respective philosophies of being which show two differing conceptions of reality. By comparing and contrasting each thinker, Schmitz will attempt, like a philosophical Jules Vern, to journey to the central aspect at the heart of reality.<sup>196</sup> His comparison of the two is not of primary interest here, but rather what, in Aquinas, leads Schmitz to conclude that existence is the central gift within each creature. What Schmitz finds revolutionary in Aquinas is how the latter developed the thought of Aristotle around act and potency.

Aristotle’s metaphysics argues for form being that which is most primary, and most actual, in being.<sup>197</sup> Thus essence, which either contained form, or was equated with form, possessed the ability to actualize all else in the creature. For Aquinas, however form was not the highest principle of actuality. Thomas argued that within created forms there exists a certain level of potency, and thus form cannot be that which is most actual in reality.<sup>198</sup> Aquinas argues that what is most actual, in reality and in created beings, is *esse*, or the act of existence. *Esse* “is the source of everything that is in the creature, and the source of generosity with which the Creator

---

195 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 97.

196 Ibid., 99. “It is clear that Hegel and St. Thomas differ about the nature of the beginning, and in the way in which they develop the question of origins...both agree that in the beginning there is being. But, for St. Thomas, that being is already what is richest and most complete in things. He calls it act...what is onto-logically first for Hegel is what is most primitive; what is metaphysically first for St. Thomas is already what is most complete.”

197 Aristotle, *Aristotle Selected Works. De Anima*. Book II.1 Aristotle says that the soul is the form of the substance of a natural body which is that body’s actuality. Schmitz reads Aristotle placing actuality on the level of form, and thus as being equated with the form. Again in *Metaphysics* Book XII.7 Aristotle seems to confirm this on the metaphysical level.

198 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 108.

creates.”<sup>199</sup> While this theme of actuality plays a prominent role in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, his distinction is most clearly delineated in a small text *De Ente and Essentia*.

Aquinas’ text begins by stating the purpose of his work: “we must begin exploring their difficulty by stating what is meant by saying ‘a being’ and ‘an essence,’ how they are found in different things, and how they are related to logical notions of genus, species, and difference.”<sup>200</sup>

Aquinas will spend chapter one indicating how being and essence are related. He argues that essence is derived from being as it is applied to the ten categories, and within the categories, it is most properly applied to substances.<sup>201</sup> The ten categories were understood to be a complete division of intelligible reality, thus Aquinas is indicating that he is reflecting upon actual beings and not just abstract thought. This is key, because Aquinas thinks that his reflection is not just a thought experiment, but an attempt to think through his experience of the world.

Chapter two examines the types of substances in reality – composite and separate – and attempts to locate essence within each of these substances.<sup>202</sup> Aquinas finds that composite substances are those of matter and form (this includes everything in the biological kingdom), whereas separate substances are those without matter (souls, angels and God).<sup>203</sup> Essence, in composite substances, is a combination of matter and form.<sup>204</sup> Essence is equated with the quiddity or ‘whatness’ of a thing. A human is not merely his body, nor his soul, but is a

---

199 Ibid., 109.

200 Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 28.

201 Ibid., 31.

202 Ibid., 34.

203 Aquinas will break with his contemporaries on this point arguing that angels are composed yet do not possess matter. This distinction will help him zero in upon the composition between form and *esse*, and thus in how *esse* is more primary and actual than form. Scott Charles MacDonald, “The Esse/Essentia Argument in Aquinas’s *De Ente et Essentia*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984): 158–159.

204 Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 35.

combination of the two – thus his essence is not one or the other, but both. Yet the principle of actualization, within an essence, is identified with form. Aquinas, following on Aristotle, understood the soul to be the principle of actualization for the body. Aquinas spends the rest of chapter two and three discussing how essences are to be understood within composite substances. While such distinctions contain fruitful reflections – especially that of particulars and universals – it is in chapter four that his famous distinction appears and which is of primary interest to the discussion of this paper.<sup>205</sup> The question is: does the soul, or the form, have any potency, or it is pure actuality?

Chapter four opens with Aquinas reflecting on how essences are found in separate substances. Aquinas divides separate substances into souls, angels and God. Souls are those which can, and do, admit of mixture with matter (at least for a time as in the case of human souls), angels exist apart from matter, and God is understood to be pure simplicity (or pure act).<sup>206</sup> This chapter contains two revolutions in the history of philosophy. The first revolution is Aquinas' argument regarding angels and matter, and the second is his argument that forms admit of potency and thus stand in need of actualization.<sup>207</sup> The two are related in that, the first revolution – of interest primarily to theologians – allows him to hone in upon the second revolution – of interest to both theologians and philosophers.<sup>208</sup>

---

205 In Chapters 2 and 3 Aquinas fleshes out how we are to understand human nature which is both present in and separate from a particular individual. Given modernity's interest in questions regarding human nature, his discussion is worth unpacking – yet it would take us off the scent of the gift which we are currently pursuing.

206 Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 53.

207 Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 168. Gilson makes the argument that Aquinas revolutionized metaphysics by introducing a distinction between formal and efficient causality.

208 The philosopher was interested in angelic, or separated substances, through the time of Kant. However, since then, and including our present day, angelic beings remain the sole concern of the theological realm.

In regards to angels Aquinas held that they are not comprised of form and matter, yet they still admit of some sort of composition and thus some potency.<sup>209</sup> What is key here, for our purposes, is that Aquinas is arguing that there can be some creatures which are form without matter (i.e. angels) and yet are not pure act (i.e. admit of potency). This is philosophically revolutionary, given Aristotle's account of form as that which is most actual.<sup>210</sup> Form was thought to be that which actualizes matter and the highest principle of actuality. Aquinas is not denying that form actualizes matter, but rather that form is not the highest principle of actuality. His point is that even form admits of potency and thus needs to be actualized. Aquinas thought that angels were both pure form, and yet they were not God, and thus were not pure actuality. If a something is not pure actuality, it must admit of some potency, and thus of some composition. This is precisely what Aquinas thought angels admitted of: "but there is in them a composition of form and being."<sup>211</sup> Thus, Aquinas understood the highest principle of actuality, and the most fundamental sense of being, to be *esse* (existence). It is this point, precisely, which is his second revolution within metaphysics.<sup>212</sup>

Aquinas argued that the distinction regarding form and being, as it applied to angels, also applied to any being whose essence was distinct from their existence. Summarizing Aquinas,

---

209 Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 51. The translator does a nice job of highlighting the various medieval thinkers with which Thomas would be disagreeing by claiming this. Some thought that there was a distinction between physical and spiritual matter and angels did not have the former but did have the latter. Aquinas disagrees, they are pure form, yet goes on to argue that they are not pure act. His distinction, between form and *esse*, causes him to posit a different understanding of angels than some of his contemporaries.

210 In the *De Anima* Aristotle claims that the soul is the form of the body. See citation #178. Form was understood to be the highest actuality, and it is the form that would actualize matter. Form stood in no need of itself being actualized. As such, since essence includes form, essence was the most primary element of being. Aquinas' position disagrees with this, while, at the same time granting to form priority within its own realm.

211 Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 52. Thus angels were a composition of form and *esse* for Aquinas.

212 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1995), 156. Hadot, quoting Kierkegaard, argues that it is actually Socrates who 'discovers' the centrality of existence for Philosophy. However, nowhere in Plato's text is the clarity and import of Aquinas distinction drawn out. Thus, even if Hadot is correct, Aquinas still deserves pride of place for the distinction he made.

Gilson writes: “the form is such an act as still remains in potency to another act, namely, existence.”<sup>213</sup> Form is located within the purview of a thing’s essence – as that which makes it ‘what it is.’ Aquinas identified form, in separate substances, to be their essence; and he identified form, in composite substances, to be part of a thing’s essence in combination with matter. Thus any form, and any essence, stands in need of being actualized by an act of existence which is exterior to the thing being actualized. It is worth quoting Aquinas’ argument in full regarding this distinction:

the following consideration makes this evident. Everything that does not belong to the concept of an essence or quiddity comes to it from outside and enters into composition with the essence, because no essence can be understood without its parts. Now, every essence or quiddity can be understood without knowing anything about its being. I can know, for instance, what a man or a phoenix is and still be ignorant whether it has being in reality. From this it is clear that being is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there is a reality whose quiddity is its being.<sup>214</sup>

Aquinas’ point is that we can understand the essence of a thing without knowing if it exists at all. This shows, for him, that existence is distinct from essence.<sup>215</sup> What a thing is, does not reveal *that* a thing is. Archeologists can tell us what dinosaurs were, and we can conceptually grasp this description, but this does not tell us *that* they currently are. Authors can tell us what a creature in Star Trek is, but this does not tell us that it actually exists. This for Aquinas, proved that nothing about a thing’s essence entailed its existence and thus existence was external to a thing’s essence.

---

<sup>213</sup> Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 174.

<sup>214</sup> Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 55.

<sup>215</sup> There has been much modern engagement with such a distinction. See below four authors that attempt to dialogue with Aquinas’ distinction in light of philosophical developments. All argue that it is still a fruitful distinction. MacDonald, “The Esse/Essentia Argument in Aquina’s De Ente et Essentia.” John Wippel, “Aquinas’ Route to the Real Distinction: A Note on ‘De Ente et Essentia,’” *The Thomist* 43, no. 2 (1979): 279–92. Two Modern takes on Aquinas’ Distinction. See also Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. Blanchette, *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*.



Aquinas thought this was the case for every being except one – God.<sup>216</sup> Thus, for all created beings, existence was something that needed to be received from an external source which is already in act.

Such a conclusion, meant that existence was a received quality of any created being. Aquinas, further in chapter four, highlights this point regarding the receptive relationship that beings have towards existence as their primary actuality:

whatever belongs to a thing is either caused by the principles of its nature...or comes to it from an extrinsic principle. Now being itself cannot be caused by the form or quiddity of a thing (by caused I mean by an efficient cause), because that thing would then be its own cause and it would bring itself into being, which is impossible. It follows that everything whose being is distinct from its nature must have being from another.<sup>217</sup>

By ‘principles of its nature’ Aquinas means from its essence, or that by which it is what it is. Thus there is nothing in the essence of a human – which is a rational animal – that will entail the existence of an actually existing human being.<sup>218</sup> The conclusion for Aquinas, regarding this distinction, is that any composite substance must receive its *esse* from an external source or cause.<sup>219</sup> Thus, between a thing and the act which brings it into existence, there is a real relation

---

216 Aquinas will argue that there is one being – God – whose existence and essence are one and thus is pure act. However, his argument for this does not concern us here – despite its legitimacy and brilliance. Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*. Chapter IV has the full argument. Also see Gilson’s *Being and Some Philosophers* Chapter 5. For an in depth logical breakdown of Aquinas’ argument see Scott Macdonald’s article. MacDonald, “The Esse/Essentia Argument in Aquina’s *De Ente et Essentia*.” This article is a detailed discussion of the logical structure and progression of the argument and defends the argument against attacks of logical fallacy and philosophical short-cuts.

217 Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 55–56.

218 At this point we can collapse Aquinas’ earlier distinction between composite and separate substances, into just composite and simple substances. Since all substances whose essence and existence is distinct admit of composition this seems justified.

219 MacDonald, “The Esse/Essentia Argument in Aquina’s *De Ente et Essentia*,” 166. See Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. For a good analyses regarding the scholastic notion of real distinctions. What is of note here is that real distinctions need not entail the possibility of separation as when act and potency are really distinct yet not separable in a thing. I’m actually sitting, but potentially standing, and both of these states are not separable from me.

of dependence and causation. Such a distinction is intuitively grasped when we think of generation between species. Each member of a species needs to be brought into existence by their parents. Thus existence is given to a child through the act of endowment by the parents, which the child plays no part in. So too, existence is caused by an exterior agent in any existing thing whose essence is distinct from its existence. Yet such an analogy is imperfect, and Aquinas' distinction implies an even more radical sense of relation between the creature and the Creator than our analogy reveals.

Our analogy seems to imply that the dependence and relationship entailed between creation and the Creator is either not applicable to all creatures, or is only applicable in a fleeting sense. In the first sense, if it is granted that God gives an initial act of existence to creatures, then the creature has the capacity to pass on this act of existence to its progeny. This means that God is no longer needed, or no longer enters into relationship with subsequent creatures. As when a child is born, the parents die, and the child goes on to have its own children. The grandchildren have no relation with the dead grandparents, and exist causally independent of them, except accidentally through their own parents.

In the second sense, even if we posit that God is actively engaged with each creature, as a cause to its effect, such engagement seems only fleeting, for it exists only at the moment of origin when the act of existence is donated. After this original donation, the creature is able to subsist apart from any relation with the Creator. This can be grasped in how a child is able to exist apart from its parents after a certain stage of development. Thus, while there is a real causal dependence, it is only temporary, since the child is able to exist without the continued action of the parents. Both of these distinctions can be collapsed into one: does the donation of existence create a temporary or permanent relation between creature and Creator? Such a question is

pertinent to discuss because, if it is not resolved, the best our analysis can conclude is that existence – taken as a whole may be a gift from the divine – but the existence of individual creatures are only gifts between species. The question centers on two points: original cause of existence and the sustaining cause of existence. We will deal with each in order.

Aquinas gives us a clue to the first answer with his distinction regarding essence and existence. His distinction reveals that the two are distinct orders of reality. Since the existence received by all composite creatures, which actualizes their essence and gives them their unique to be, no creature *has* existence, but *participates* in it. Now, no being can give what it itself does not have, thus it follows that no creature is able to give existence *per se*. What each creature has is its own act of existence, but it does not have existence *per se*. When a new creature is created, it receives its own act of existence. This act of existence comes outside of the essential order, thus outside the order of any creature's possible agency (given the distinction between essence and existence). This can be intuitively grasped through analogy.

A human is comprised of body and soul and this makes up his essence. Yet, as Aquinas has argued, this essence stands in need of being actualized. Thus the soul, which is the activating principle of the body, stands in need of being actualized by its received act of existence. Once the soul receives its act of existence it is able to actualize the body. We describe this as if it is a temporal process, but in reality it is instantaneous. The act of existence brings into existence and actuality the soul, which is simultaneously joined to a body that it actualizes. Thus the person is a double composite unity of essence – a composite of body and soul – combined with its own unique existence. Now when two creatures, in turn, generate offspring, what they are able to communicate is part of their matter, but they cannot directly give their soul or their act of existence. The soul of each parent actualizes their own body, and as an immaterial principle is

not capable of division and dissemination.<sup>220</sup> The cause of existence in the new child, must come from an agency that is in addition to the parents. It is not that the parents have no agency – they have a proper and proximate agency which includes the material conditions – however they cannot be the absolute cause of their child’s act of existence, for such an effect is outside of their agency to give. Thus, Aquinas claims that the act of existence is not given to creation in general, or only at the beginning, but rather that existence is offered, by the Creator, to each new life personally and uniquely.<sup>221</sup> Yet is it offered momentarily or continuously?

To proffer an answer this second question, we will examine two instances of efficient causality drawing on Aquinas’s framework, but with our own examples. It will be remembered that efficient causality (agent causality) is that by which a form is generated or corrupted. For example, a piece of marble is made into a statue of Pope Francis through the agency of a sculptor. The form of Pope Francis is impressed upon the marble through the sculptor’s agency. The action of this sculptor must exist simultaneously to the effect of the marble becoming a statue of Pope Francis. If the action of the sculptor were to stop, the statue would stop its process of becoming. However, once the statue is complete, its existence no longer depends upon the sculptor’s action. The sculptor may die, may work on other statues, and the statue of Pope Francis will go on existing.<sup>222</sup>

---

220 For a thorough discussion of hylomorphism in creatures see: Oderburg, *Real Essentialism*. Also David Oderburg, “Hylomorphic Dualism,” *Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation*, 2005, 69–99. Aquinas discusses how, what is passed on by the parents is only biological in: De. Pot. Q.III. Art. IX. And again in De. Pot. Q.5. Art. I. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/QDdePotentia.htm>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016. And again in S.T. I Q.65 Art.4. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/summa/index.html>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016.

221 Aquinas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Book II. Q.21.10. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/ContraGentiles.htm>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016.

222 Of course it can be destroyed, but this is a distinct cause from the sculptor bringing it into existence.

Aquinas, concludes from this, that there are some causes which necessarily exist simultaneously to their effect *only* as to the effect's becoming, and not to the effect's existence after it has been brought into being.<sup>223</sup> Such causes are those that involve physical movement or change and thus are most proper to the interaction of corporeal agency. As soon as the movement or change is completed, the effect is no longer becoming it is being and thus the causal relationship has ceased. In other words, efficiency in regards to change by motion, ends when either the cause ceases in the process of becoming (i.e. the sculptor never finishes the statue), or when one form has been replaced by another (i.e. when the square marble now has the form of Pope Francis). Once the form has come to be in the matter, it exists without need of its proper efficient cause to keep it in existence.

There is another type of interaction of efficient causality, that of incorporeal agency, whose effect is dependent upon its cause for its becoming *and* its being.<sup>224</sup> When an incorporeal agent causes an effect, such an effect is dependent upon it for its becoming and its being. An *imperfect* analogy of this efficient causality, would be how the sound of a guitar is dependent upon the vibrations of the strings. The sound ceases to exist as soon as the strings stop vibrating. The sound comes into being as an effect of the strings having been vibrated by a hand, yet its being continues to be dependent upon the vibrations. If the vibrations stop, the sound stops, unlike that of the statue and the sculptor. So too, for Aquinas, when an incorporeal agent acts as an efficient cause, the effect of that cause can only remain, insofar as the cause simultaneously continues to exist, and continues to sustain the effect it brought into being:<sup>225</sup>

---

223 Aquinas. *Commentary on Aristotle's physics*. Lecture 6 paragraph 195. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/Physics.htm>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016.

224 Aquinas. De. Pot. Q.III Art.IX. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/QDdePotentia.htm>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016.

and thus it follows that just as inferior agents, which are causes of the coming to be of things, must exist simultaneously with the things which come to be as long as they are coming to be, so also the divine agent, which is the cause of existing in act, is simultaneous with the existence of the thing in act. Hence if the divine action were removed from things, things would fall into nothingness, just as when the presence of the sun is removed, light ceases to be in the air.<sup>226</sup>

Thus the agency of the parent engendering a child becomes like the first case of efficient causality – where the child is able to exist independently of its cause, as soon as it has finished its becoming and is in being.<sup>227</sup> However, in regards to existence properly – or absolutely – no creature is ever able to cease to be dependent upon the Creator, since the effect of existence depends necessarily and continuously upon the existence of its cause as well as the continued act of offering existence to the creature. Aquinas concludes that existence in creatures is by participation in the source of existence itself and that: “every being in any way existing is from God.”<sup>228</sup>

This digression was taken in order to more fully grasp of how Aquinas’ distinction between essence and existence was meant to be understood. Since existence could be taken as proximate or absolute, it was necessary to discuss how Aquinas understood the donation of

---

225 Aquinas. S.C.G. Book II. Chapter 16 & 17. <http://dhspriory.org/thomas/english/ContraGentiles.htm>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2016. He explains incorporeal agents can be causes that are without motion or change as in the case of creation. Our analogy is meant to highlight the unique type of agency that the divine has in regards to existence. It is not meant to imply that human agency – which is also partially spiritual – necessitates continual sustaining action to bring about its effect.

226 Aquinas. De. Pot. Q. V Art. I. <http://dhspriory.org/thomas/english/QDdePotentia.htm>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016.

227 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 124–125. Schmitz makes direct understanding of causality.

228 Aquinas. S.T. I Q.44. Art. I. <http://dhspriory.org/thomas/english/summa/index.html>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016. This type of efficient causality is a unique aspect of causality when predicated of the divine. Creation, thus understood, is not a motion, nor generation (which require pre-existing matter), rather it is a divine communication without loss. Such communication without loss, is found analogously in humans (e.g. teaching/learning), but the divine ability to communicate without loss includes the act of creation. See Schmitz, “Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete.”

existence absolutely as to always be dependent upon the Creator directly. This claim allows existence to not be seen as a brute fact. In addition, it prevents the understanding of the relation between creatures and Creator as if one of distance or detachment. Rather, Aquinas understood the donation of existence to bring the Creator and the creature into a real relation – on the side of the creature – and such a relation was continuous for as long as existence was granted to the creature.<sup>229</sup> Schmitz draws upon this distinction as he writes: “the actuation in the thing at this most absolute level of actuality...comes about through the communication of *esse* to the creature by the Creator.”<sup>230</sup> Thus for Schmitz existence is a gift not a mere fact.<sup>231</sup> Yet it must be admitted that arguing that existence is communicated from one being to another, may rule out existence understood as a brute fact, but it does not yet eliminate existence understood as a burden. For existence, as was already explained, is a unique kind of endowment – since no creature is able to accept its existence, but rather finds itself ‘thrown into’ a reality that it was not offered the choice to refuse. In such a situation, existence might legitimately be called a burden or a curse, instead of a gift. To argue against understanding existence as a burden, Schmitz turns to St. Anselm as well as to his own ideas around widening the gift.

### 3.2 Expanding the gift

Schmitz makes a two-fold pivot after laying out his basic framework of the gift. Both pivots might be understood as extending the category of the gift to its fullest implications – like a

---

229 Aquinas thought this was an absolute given, given the goodness of God. However, Aquinas’ discussion of creaturely relation to the creator and to causality peppers his entire corpus. We could not give an exhaustive account of this thought on these points, given the focus of our thesis.

230 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 110.

231 Ibid., 102. As he writes – ‘existence is actuality not mere factuality.’ Schmitz also writes: “The absolute nature of ontological dependence entitles us to use the category of the gift to articulate the implications of the relation, since it belongs to a gift to be uncalled for, to be given without prior conditions.” Schmitz, “Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete,” 9.

balloon which expands, yet without breaking.<sup>232</sup> Schmitz describes these pivots as ‘complicating factors’ which rest upon extending the non-parity between giver and receiver to include situations of absolute inequality – such as the situation understood in *creatio ex nihilo* and existence. Schmitz makes such a move based upon a simple, and familiar, example which highlights how he imagines the gift to be both stretched and yet not dissolved. The key point will be if, after extending the situation to include absolute non-parity, the notion of the gift still adequately describes such a scenario.

Schmitz’s original conception of the ‘simple gift’ is where you have a giver, a receiver and something endowed.<sup>233</sup> His modified situation, which is a widening of the non-parity between giver and receiver, is when you have an original giver, who endows the conditions for another giver to give something back to the original giver. In such a situation an original giver, endows a recipient with the conditions that make it possible to become a giver back to the original donor. Such a scenario can be of relative or absolute inequality.<sup>234</sup> Schmitz turns to a common example to illustrate his point regarding a situation of relative inequality which is his first pivot to widen the gift.

His example is of a child with its parent (i.e. a mother). The mother gives the child some money so that the child can buy his mother a gift for mother’s day. The mother has provided all the relative conditions that make gifting possible on behalf of the child to his mother (the mother has endowed the child with life, and with the money to purchase the gift etc.). Thus the parent has put all of the relative conditions into place for the child to offer the parent a gift. This

---

232 This is another reason for seeing Schmitz as understanding the gift along the lines of analogy. Analogy allows the word to be predicated across diverse situations without collapsing into a univocal or equivocal meaning.

233 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 61.

234 *Ibid.*, 62.



situation reveals a relative inequality between the two parties.<sup>235</sup> The parent has an unequal role in the gifting process, she is both the receiver, as well as the giver which made possible the conditions for the child to itself become a giver.<sup>236</sup> Is such an interaction, the child offering a gift to his mother from something his mother gave, still worthy of the name ‘gift?’

Schmitz argues that three things are revealed in such a gifting scenario. The first is that between the child and the parent there is a relative inequality, since the parent makes possible the conditions for the child to offer its gift. This is distinct from the inequality between any ‘normal’ giver and receiver, because in this situation the receiver is also the original donor that made possible the conditions for the secondary donor to offer a gift. Second, as a result of the first condition, the gift that is offered does not possess an independent value for the parent, since what is given to the parent was made possible by the parent herself.<sup>237</sup> There is no independent value within the gift between child and parent that can be equated economically.<sup>238</sup> It is the third condition that allows it to become a gift for Schmitz: the offering symbolizes and thus communicates the giver to the receiver.<sup>239</sup> What the child offers to the mother has been endowed by the child – freely – and thus can truly become a gift which bears the child to the mother. As such, it can be properly called a gift.<sup>240</sup> Thus the gift has been widened to include a new category

235 I say relative because there is not an absolute dependence between mother and child, in that the child exists apart from the mother and thus brings something outside of the mother to the relationship.

236 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 62.

237 Ibid.

238 On the face of it, the parent is merely getting her ‘money back’ after the child transformed it into a specific form of this gift.

239 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 82.

240 Ibid., 62. A further condition makes a gift really possible in such a scenario. In a situation of relative inequality – as with the child – the parents are not the sole cause of all the conditions of the child’s existence. A child may receive things that are not from the parent, and thus, at times, can offer something to the parent that has come from a different source than the parent. An example of this would be the child receiving some money from an uncle and then with this money purchases a gift for its parents. Thus the child is really able to offer gifts to his parent, either in the case where the parents provide most of the conditions for the gift, or if the child is able to offer something that it

of giving for Schmitz. Yet this is only a step for Schmitz, not the final resting place, because existence is a gift even beyond relative inequality. Schmitz goes on to make his next pivot.

Schmitz asks the reader to imagine “a situation in which there is absolute unconditioned inequality. Here the donor would be the founder of the entire order within which the giver gives and within which the recipient receives.”<sup>241</sup> This is his second pivot and widening. In such a situation, Schmitz observes, “nothing can be introduced from outside as from an independent source.” This is the situation of creation that is understood to be *creatio ex nihilo* – this is the situation between God and creatures for Schmitz; this the situation of the gift of existence.<sup>242</sup> The original donor, gives everything to the original recipient, and nothing exists that the original recipient could offer back to the donor that had not first been given by the donor to the recipient.

In such a scenario, does there exist giftedness or humiliation? If it is to be a gift, the creature must be able to respond in freedom, while the giver must respect the decision of the recipient – according to Schmitz. Yet existence seems to challenge this framework – as no creature can refuse to be brought into existence. Is such a situation of absolute inequality suffocating of human activity or is it generative?<sup>243</sup> Can the creature retain both a total dependence and an inherent dignity?<sup>244</sup> What is at issue is the potential freedom on behalf of the recipient, as well as the restraint on behalf of the giver, which both are constitutive of any gift.

---

did not first receive from its parents.

241 Ibid., 63.

242 Aquinas. *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Book II. Q.21.10. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/ContraGentiles.htm>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016. As Thomas will say, the gift of existence is a making out of nothing. It is true that matter already exists in any act of creation after the original act, yet, what is out of nothing is the gift of existence and of a soul. Thus each creature is properly understood to have been made ‘ex nihilo’ in terms of its endowed existence

243 Existence is seen as humiliating when God is understood as power. Schmitz wonders if seeing God as Love offers a way out of this vision of existence. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 67. “An overwhelming love may be a gentle yoke, yet where in its soft coils is man?”

244 Ibid., 81.

If there is to be a receptivity and gratuity on behalf of the creature – in a situation of absolute inequality – then it will be of a unique kind. Why? Because in the gift of creation, what is fundamentally gifted to the creature is its existence.<sup>245</sup> Unlike the scenarios from chapter two, no creature can reject the gift of existence outright. “No creature is consulted before it is created, because there is no creature to consult.”<sup>246</sup> This is grasped intuitively through human reproduction, and is also the reason why some can claim that existence is no gift – but rather a burden.<sup>247</sup> The creature is already ‘thrown in’ to a life which it did not ask for, nor did it have the opportunity to reject or accept. If it does receive or accept such a gift, it would seem to be a secondary acceptance, like that of a child who accepts the dinner placed before them knowing it has no other choice.<sup>248</sup> How, then, can such a state of affairs be labeled as a gift? Is not the freedom of the recipient compromised and, thus, does this not annul the gift?

Schmitz, with philosophical alacrity, parses such a problem. We must return to the question of the possibility of integrity within a situation of absolute dependence. The question rests on whether absolute dependence is fundamentally humiliating, and if a certain type of freedom is possible within such a situation. In regards to the first, Schmitz thinks that to posit humiliation and indignity for a situation of absolute dependence puts the cart before the horse. He draws on St. Anselm for such an insight in his text. Such characterizations “are founded

---

245 Ibid., 117.

246 Ibid., 93.

247 Ibid., 63. Schmitz puts Sartre, Nietzsche, Marx and Comte in such a box of viewing existence as a burden or an absurdity. Marcel makes the same point, that existence can be seen as a punishment, especially if it is experienced to be a poor one. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*, 244.

248 Schmitz, “Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete,” 10. Schmitz discusses this exact problem here. He argues that the primary reality of such a gift, constitutively orders the creature towards its source. Thus the creature has a relation towards itself, but also towards its source, thus – for Schmitz – highlighting a fundamental tension within existence. Thus the very reality of creatures is relational, which is primarily internal.

upon, derivative from and ontologically posterior to, the foundational ingress into being.”<sup>249</sup>

Creaturely dependence is not one possibility among many, from which one might label it as humiliating, it is precisely what it means to be a creature. As Schmitz will call it, a creature is not a thing that receives, but sheer receiving.<sup>250</sup> The fundamental option, then, is between Being and non-being; between existence and non-existence. It is not the option of the creature, but of the Creator. In this sense, then, existence might be called a gift, an offering of existence – existence to this particular being.<sup>251</sup> The creature stands outside of nothingness, through the creative generosity of the Creator. The fundamental gift of existence is that act which endows existence and reality to the creature. It is a fundamentally ennobling act.<sup>252</sup> But if it can be labeled a gift on the side of the giver, does this gift – that of existence – allow for any freedom of acceptance and response on behalf of the receiver?

Existence, understood as gift, opens up a path for the integrity of the creature and its freedom. Schmitz argues that to truly be in relation with, there is an objective discipline needed that demands of both parties a being with the other on its own terms. Schmitz finds two examples of this in experience to highlight his point. His first is that of knowing – which is a type of relationship. He says that to really know something there is the requirement that “the knower be with the known on the terms of the known.”<sup>253</sup> A scholar must try and see the world from the perspective of the thinker or his time period, in order to really understand him. To enter into one’s reality which both seeks a relation with, but also respects the otherness of the one to be

---

<sup>249</sup> Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 75.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 84.

known, only this type of encounter really allows one to know another. The subject matter “places an unconditional demand upon the enquirer that he respect its integrity, even as he enters into relationship with it.”<sup>254</sup> Schmitz then looks at the example of benevolent love.

To love is to be in relationship with. Yet a truly benevolent love, and not a false love, requires three things: the risk of generosity, the satisfaction of subjectivity and the discipline of objectivity.<sup>255</sup> The risk of generosity, in that something is offered; subjectivity in that satisfaction or enjoyment exists between the lover and the beloved’ and objectivity in that the beloved respects the inherent dignity and freedom of the lover to respond or to reject. “Genuine love, may not reckon the cost to the giver, but it does reckon the cost to the recipient.”<sup>256</sup> It is the giving of oneself while, at the same time, respecting the integrity of the one to whom the gift is offered. This creative restraint through the discipline of objectivity offers to the beloved her integrity and her freedom to accept or reject what is offered. Through these analogies of knowing and loving, Schmitz thinks we can grasp how integrity of the creature is possible in a situation of absolute inequality of giving and receiving between the Creator and the creature.

Thus the pivot of understanding God not as power, but as love, allows giftedness to return to existence. A creative love, which offers existence, will also fulfil the objective restraint required for a genuine love; thus existence will bear with it a level of integrity and freedom for the creature that the Creator chooses to abide by and respect.<sup>257</sup> This is easily grasped if we return to our now familiar example of a parent and a child. The only difference is now let us posit that

---

254 Ibid., 83.

255 Ibid., 84.

256 Ibid., 85.

257 Ibid., 92-93. “The absolute creative power, can voluntarily withhold itself for the good of the creature and its integrity or freedom.” Such a situation still involves risk for the divine – precisely because of the freedom that creature is endowed with. It is the risk of loving, it is the risk of entering into relationship with.

the child is a baby. When a parent interacts with the child – in loving ways – it is on the level of the child. The parent does not expect the child to act and speak as an adult – rather the parent lowers herself to the level of the child to know and love the child on its own terms. Think again of how they play. The parent chooses not to exercise all of its ability which would dominate the child in the game, but allows the child to exercise its real, yet limited, freedom to play – and often to win – while the parent accompanies the child in joy and love. Through such interactions, the child and parent come to know and be in relation; it is an unequal relation, in that the parent interacts with the child on the child’s level, yet it is a real relation none the less. So too with existence; if it is to be a gift, it must give to the creature a freedom and integrity which the Creator grants to it and abides by.

But if integrity, as well as giftedness, entails freedom, at least a freedom of response, how can this apply to existence which is already given before a creature can respond? I think the key lies in Schmitz’s notion of endowment. What is offered in any gifting process is both the gift and subsequently a relationship with the giver. When the gift is accepted, so is the relationship. When the gift is rejected, so is the relationship. When the gift is seized, without regard for the giver, the relationship is compromised.<sup>258</sup> It is precisely this aspect of relationship which is within the freedom of the creature to accept or reject. The Creator offers existence, as a gift, unconditionally and totally. This is the risk of any gifting process; it is the risk of generosity. With the offering of such a gift, there is a constitutive offering of a relationship with the creature. The creature, in its very being, is already in relation with Creator as the cause of its existence, yet the relationship can be acknowledged and accepted, or ignored and rejected. The creature is free

---

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 94. Schmitz is aware that existence, understood as a loving gift, does not remove risk, precisely because a genuine response by the creature cannot be forced, but must be waited upon.

to accept or reject this relationship.<sup>259</sup> A gift is fulfilled when it is accepted, thus the initial offer of the Creator is tarnished when the creature rejects the relationship; however, the initial gift of existence – precisely as a gift – is never taken back from the creature. It is this intuition that Aquinas clued into when he wrote that creative existence is both contingent and necessary.<sup>260</sup>

### 3.3 Hermeneutics or Philosophical Necessity?

For Schmitz to be able to consider existence as a gift, it must fulfil his definition of a gift as: “a free endowment upon another who receives it freely.”<sup>261</sup> Through Aquinas, we have seen that existence is an endowment from one agent upon another. Since the recipient does not even exist before the gift is offered, there can be no obligation on behalf of the Creator to offer this existence, thus such an offering is free. It is for this reason that Schmitz characterizes all creation, and the human person in particular, as essentially a receptive being. The conditions of its existence, entail relationality and receptivity. What it means to be a creature is sheer receiving. Yet the response of the creature is not forced; how one will respond to this state of receptivity and the gift of existence is dependent upon the creature’s freedom. The completion of the gift of existence is dependent upon the creature to choose to accept it as a gift, to see it as a gift, to respond with gratitude. The gift of existence will fail to be a completed gift if the creature refuses to accept it as a gift; refuses to respond in gratitude; refuses the offered relationship with the Giver of existence.

---

259 The creature can accept in generosity the gift of existence and the relationship that has been offered, or it can reject such a relation and seize the gift for its own purpose.

260 Both Schmitz and Aquinas draw this out. Once the gift of existence is offered, it will not be taken back. It is an offering that is a total risk, and in some sense a total abandonment as to the creator and the giver. To give and then to take back would be to violate God’s will and goodness, thus Aquinas concludes that the creature is both contingent and necessary – contingent in that it need not have been created, yet necessary in that, once it has been created, it will not be annihilated. Aquinas. *De. Pot. Q.V. Art. III*  
<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/QDdePotentia.htm#5:2>. Accessed April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016.

261 Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 44.

Like ordinary gifts, existence can be endowed with expectations, hopes and even obligations on behalf of the Giver, yet it remains a gift as long as these expectations, hopes and obligations are not forced upon the creature, but must be accepted freely. The fundamental response of the creature, the fundamental receptivity, is gratitude; an awe-filled gratitude at so mysterious a gift that has been offered. Such a response enters the creature into relationship with the Creator. It is an acceptance of one's place as a creature and of the responsibility to be a good host to what has been received. Quoting Marcel, Schmitz writes: "to the extent to which life is accepted as a gift, it is a call for a pledge of fidelity."<sup>262</sup> It is a call that the creature must daily respond to; existence, as act, will never be a static thing nor call for a static response. It is full of risk and full of promise.<sup>263</sup>

Such a discussion has opened up a needed amendment to Schmitz' definition of the gift. A free endowment freely accepted, says nothing about whether what is offered and accepted is a good thing for the recipient. I think Schmitz's definition and discussion implies that a gift is a good for the recipient, but it is not explicitly stated.<sup>264</sup> But for a gift, to be a true gift, it must be something that is actually good and intended as a good for the recipient. This added distinction reveals the false gifted character of things offered that are intended to harm. This is crucial for the understanding existence as a gift; for if a true gift were possible to be deleterious for the recipient, then a burden can be freely accepted and given without necessarily being good for the recipient. Thus a gift can really be a gift, even if it is misinterpreted as a burden, as long as it is

---

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 33. As when he describes creation as a good received. Also, all of his analogies exclusively use examples of gifts that are beneficial to the recipient. Thus it is clear that Schmitz understands a gift to be a good thing, but it is important to make that explicit. Further, on page 130 Schmitz describes existence as a good: "the finality of the donation is at once the good of the creature and the goodness of the donor." See also page 81.



actually good for the recipient (thus tough love can be a type of gift to a child, who can only see it as a burden and who rejects its gifted character).

The above two distinctions have returned us once again to the notion of analogy in Schmitz' account of the gift. There are imperfect gifts, and fulfilled gifts. An imperfect gift is that which is not received, or received and not brought to fulfilment: whereas a fulfilled gift is that which is received and brought to fulfilment. Both rely upon the principle of gratuity which holds the analogous predication of the gift together. Gifts are able to emerge from situations of obligation insofar as the giver endows them with gratuity that goes beyond the obligation. Gifts are able to be given when the recipient has also first been the relative donor making the conditions for giving possible (as in the case of a parent and its child). The child is able to give through the personal endowment of what is offered, which becomes a real gift offered to the parent. Lastly, there can be gifts in situations of absolute inequality – as that between the Creator and the creature. What the Creator gives can be truly a gift, if what is given is a good for the creature, and the creature retains its freedom to respond or to reject to what is offered. Thus the Creator must respect the objective character of the gift, which demands the giver wait for the receiver to respond, thus the giver accepts the risk of being rejected as well as the hope of being accepted. What the creature, then, is able to give to the Creator, is its consent to the relationship and its acceptance: to see existence as the gift that it is.

Schmitz's definition of a gift has been stretched to include existence, but it did not break. It did not break because of the principle of gratuity that must be present for any predication of the gift. Gratuity which exists on behalf of the giver and on behalf of the receiver. Yet existence is still a gift analogously, and not directly, because existence is not a gift extrinsic to the creature, but is the very ground of its reality. Thus the creature's response to the gift of existence is a

secondary response; it is a response of how one will see their existence and of what one will do with its existence. This unique situation of existence imbues it with its inherent tensions and its mysterious character. As Schmitz says, at the end of his text, “it is characteristic of such important conceptions that they retain their original tensions, even after extensive analysis. They are, in Marcel’s sense of the word, ineluctably mysterious.”<sup>265</sup> Existence is just such an important conception and reality that it retains its tensions, and its mystery after an all too brief analysis. It is these tensions that allows for conflicting interpretations.

Schmitz’s analysis has drawn out a certain way of understanding both the gift and existence in which it is possible to predicate the gift of existence. Yet such a predication, while philosophically justified, is not logically necessary or absolute. It is for this very reason, that contrary interpretations of existence are possible – as given, or as a burden. As Schmitz himself admits, his analysis is intended to clarify the category of the gift, and how existence can be understood in light of the gift being predicated of it; it is not meant to definitively settle that creation and existence is a gift.<sup>266</sup> In order to do so, one would need to prove that existence and creation was offered freely, intended for the good of the creature and that the creature retains a level of freedom which would prevent existence from being considered a burden.

We find ourselves as existing beings – thus it can seem that existence is merely a given. We are not able to accept or reject our existence and such existence can be a struggle – thus it can seem like a burden. These conclusions are not irrational – yet such stances are themselves interpretations, which rely on certain conceptions to justify them. They, too, are not definitive – as Schmitz’s analysis was meant to show. For Schmitz, either of the above interpretations

---

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 87.

collapses the mystery of existence and removes the tensions inherent within. For Schmitz “the creature is bounded at the nadir by nothing, and at the apex by eternity.”<sup>267</sup> As bounded by finitude, existence can always be seen as a burden, or as a curse, because it forgets the apex of eternity. Seen as mere given, existence forgets the fundamental relationality that brings existence into being. Yet existence seen as a gift keeps both the bounded finitude, and the call forward toward eternity in place. Existence as gift, preserves the tensions of existence, and yet deepens them because it adds to existence both risk and promise; offer and response; call and relationship. Existence, seen as gift, opens up – once again – the possibility of mystery and thus of wonder within reality. It is meant to return a feeling of awe that results when reflecting on the question “why is there something rather than nothing?” The gifted character of existence, can be argued for, but it can never be definitively proven. In the final analysis Schmitz is hoping to recover a way of seeing existence.<sup>268</sup> It can be seen other ways, but he thinks these ways do not do justice to its real character. Existence is best seen, for Schmitz, as a gift and a mystery. Let us now turn to a more fully developed response to the framework of Derrida and Marion, highlighting both the strengths and weakness of the two arguments, so as to give further credence to Schmitz’s framework of the gift.

#### **Chapter Four – Sketching a Response and Solidifying an Answer**

Gilson conceived of philosophy as a way of seeing things.<sup>269</sup> What a philosopher saw was often correct and beneficial for philosophy, it was what they failed to see – or could not see – that created problems within their thought. Gilson thought that one could interact with a

---

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>268</sup> Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*. Chapter V. Gilson makes the same point. He argues that philosophy as seeing is characteristic of a metaphysics of act or of existence.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 212–213. Gilson’s conceived of existential philosophy as a way of seeing. “The philosophy which naturally follows from the above defined conception of being definitively rests on seeing.”

philosopher around what he had seen – and often seen rightly – and put this into dialogue with what a philosopher had been blind to, or had not seen.<sup>270</sup> Thus, rather than coming at philosophers with a prism of approval and condemnation, Gilson wanted to view philosophers as common lookouts in the search for truth, each seeing something important, but each blind to some aspect of reality. Insofar as the philosopher was blind to an aspect of reality, his position admitted of enlightenment or reform. This section proceeds under this methodological approach of gratitude: to seek to receive from and respond to both Derrida and Marion. Insofar as these positions admit of fundamental differences between one another and also with Schmitz's position, outlined in chapter two, they cannot all stand on equally secure ground. Yet before proceeding to show how Marion and Derrida have been blind to a certain aspect of the gift, I would like to start by tracing what they saw correctly around this discussion.<sup>271</sup>

#### 4.1 Derrida's Vision

Derrida accurately sees the structure of the gift. He sees that a gift necessitates a giver, something given, and a receiver. It is precisely this fixed character of the gift-structure that leads him to his insurmountable aporias. Derrida's problems with the gift result from his proper conception of the tri-partite nature of the gift, as well as his concern to preserve the gratuity within the structure of the gift, including that on behalf of the receiver understood in his non-reciprocation criterion. He lays out a high ideal of the gift, which he sometimes seems to despair of reaching, but high ideals are not a mark of a blind man, but rather of an honest seeker.

Derrida's aporias can be seen to result from his noble conception of the ideal gift, combined with

---

<sup>270</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1937), 242–243.

<sup>271</sup> It is admitted that such a response to Derrida and Marion can only be a sketch if it is to remain within the bounds of this paper. A fuller response to these men is needed. Yet such a response would need to proceed around the points I attempt to flag, and thus through problematizing their framework I hope to both indicate a path of response to them, as well as pointing to the validity of Schmitz's analysis of the gift.

his realistic understanding of human motives, which are seldom, if ever, as pure as Derrida thinks they need to be.<sup>272</sup>

Derrida's problematizing of the gift also highlights, correctly, the complexity of a gift. He sees correctly that the language of gifting can cover over what is really an exchange of goods. Gifts are not simple things.<sup>273</sup> If gratuity is constitutive of a gift, it can be asked what constitutes such gratuity? Derrida thinks that gratuity is totally unconditioned: no expectation, or obligation can enter into the gift relationship. Derrida can be seen as questioning whether such an ideal state can be attained. Can a gift be given in freedom – without motive, and be accepted without making a return? His question has a bite. Social conventions can demand gifts be given at certain times which can chip away at a giver's freedom (i.e. holiday and birthday giving). Are these gifts truly free? Is there not a duty to give at certain times that cheapens or eliminates the gift character of the encounter? Further, sociological research confirms that gifts can be laden with implicit or explicit burdens of reciprocity.<sup>274</sup>

A gift that seems disproportionate to a situation or relationship can imply ulterior motives.<sup>275</sup> Rejections of gifts by receivers, or frustration by givers at a lack of reciprocity, evidence that not all gifts are gratuitous. Then there are gifts which seek to mend or heal relationships – these are given freely, but with the intention of having the recipient forgive the

---

272 Caputo and Scanlon, *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, 59–60. Derrida thinks he is actually helping the idea of the gift, by trying to think it in its impossibility. "A gift is something you do without knowing what you do, without knowing who gives the gift, who receives the gift, and so on." It is a messianic, future not-yet now for Derrida, according to Caputo.

273 Both Schmitz and Marion admit as much. In fact all secondary literature I've consulted admit of the opaque nature of gifting from the side of the giver or the receiver

274 Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Ashworth, "The Gift Relationship."

275 An example of such a gift could be that of a first date, when a guy treats a women to an expensive meal or offers an expensive present

giver for a past action. Such a gift can be seen as an exchange or payment of the debt of wrongdoing. Derrida is right to point out that gratuity is harder to achieve than initially imagined; thus he is justified in raising questions around it. Derrida's analysis confronts every potential giver with the hard question – what is the motive behind this gift? This is a very positive advance by Derrida for cultural and philosophic reflection on gifting. Whereas Mauss sees this implicit exchange character as unproblematic, Derrida, flags it as in need of questioning and reflection. Yet Derrida was also blind to an aspect of the gift.

Derrida's aporetic analysis of the gift causes him to posit that intentionality and reciprocity must be overcome in any true gift exchange. As Manolopoulos observes, Derrida notices the dual, and aporetic, nature of the gift – gratuity and reciprocity – and then goes on to collapse the gift into pure gratuity in order to think it outside its aporetic framework. Such a collapse causes him to posit that the gift – the impossible gift – cannot appear within our experience, for gratuity is compromised as soon as a gift is made present.<sup>276</sup> Further, his framework leads him to deny gifts as having an interpersonal quality and function.<sup>277</sup> Because a gift cannot be reciprocated, for Derrida, it cannot be known or experienced as a gift – thus it cannot take place between subjects, for there would be a burden of exchange or a compromise of motives as a result. Yet such an analysis denies the inherent relational quality that, experientially, manifests in the gift-process.<sup>278</sup> Philosophy is thus used, not to deepen our understanding of reality, or experience, rather it undermines a ubiquitous feature of it: gift-giving. Gifts are offered between subjects out of recognition for, or establishment of, a relationship. Derrida's

---

276 Manolopoulos, "Derrida's Gift to Eco/Theo/Logos: A Critical Tribute," 60.

277 Malo, "The Limits of Marion's and Derrida's Philosophy of the Gift," 160. Derrida writes: "the gift cannot take place between subjects. It will always have already been. It will always have already been."

278 As Ashworth's sociological study suggests, to give a gift implies the existence of, or the engendering of, a relationship whereas: "to accept a gift is to accept [this] relationship. Ashworth, "The Gift Relationship," 26.

positing that a gift can occur, but only in secret, implies that the relational feature of a gift is unnecessary, when in fact, this is just the opposite.

Another problem is Derrida's high ideal of gratuity that he posits for both giver and receiver. One scholar calls it "the unconditional gift" which should be decided before any relation to a subject.<sup>279</sup> Where does Derrida get his high ideal for a gift? Is this grounded in reality, or the gift phenomenon, or is it a requirement imposed *a priori*? Derrida's high ideal leads him to call into question the gift itself, instead of the ideal he has attached to the gift. Such pure gratuity seems to be imposed on the gift by Derrida. Nathan Miczo, like Schmitz, takes a different road.<sup>280</sup>

Miczo proposes, after careful study of many conceptions of gift-giving, to plot gifting on a mathematical graph with two dimensions. One dimension is that of reciprocity; the other is that of singularization.<sup>281</sup> Such a mapping of the gift results in four prototypes of the gift: charitable, sacrificial, obliging, and bartered. As Miczo points out, only one falls into the traditional economic model, and at least two escape the aporia of non-reciprocity (at least if we exclude signs of gratitude).<sup>282</sup> Miczo's analysis, along with another sociologist – Peter Ashworth –

---

279 Charles Champetier, "Philosophy of the Gift: Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2001): 1.

280 Nathan Miczo, "The Human Condition and the Gift: Towards a Theoretical Perspective on Close Relationships," *Hum Stud* 31 (2008): 133–155.

281 Ibid., 150-153. The charitable gift is characterized by "low expectation of return, and low singularization," because it is often given to those in need, and can tend to have less personal engagement. An example of this would be donating to a person on the street. The sacrificial gift has a "low expectation of return, yet a high singularization" because to sacrifice for someone is always relational and usually very personal, yet without the expectation of return. An example of this might be offering an organ to a loved one. Bartered gifts are characterized by a "high expectation of return, and low singularization." This is what Miczo calls economic exchange, and would not fall into any category of gift in the sense we have been using in the paper. Lastly is the obliging gift exchange which has the traits of "high expectation of return and high singularization." An example of such a gift might be a lavish dinner held for friends, with the expectations that a return invitations would come one's way in the near future.

282 Ibid., 153.

suggest both the omnipresence of gift exchanges within the human conditions, and the more holistic attitude of placing gift exchanges on a spectrum, instead of within a box – as Derrida does. Derrida’s ideal can be challenged as an *a priori* restriction on the gift, instead of emerging from an analysis of gifting as it exists in its murky human condition.

Further, Derrida’s aporias, can be challenged on his denial of reciprocity, even that of simple gratitude. His inability to see how gratuity and reciprocity can coexist within the gift, causes him to despair of the gift’s presence, and to collapse the gift into a notion of pure gratuity. He does not seem to see that reciprocity is not what characterizes the economic model that he seeks to liberate the gift from, but *a certain type of reciprocity*. There is a fundamental difference between economic exchange and gifted exchange. As Ashworth argues: “commodity exchange establishes a relationship between the objects exchanged, whereas gift exchange establishes a relationship between the subjects.”<sup>283</sup> The different relationships engendered, entail a different logic of reciprocity. Economic exchange, (i.e. payment), is different, in principle, from a gift exchange which is characterized “by an event in which the confirmation of mutual affective identities is expressed” and the relationship is cemented.<sup>284</sup> The recipient offers a reciprocal gesture, either of gifting, or gratitude, which reveals that the relationship which the giver confirms or initiates is mutual.<sup>285</sup> Without the possibility of reciprocity, gifts cannot establish relationships, or fruitfully exist between subjects, they can only be a transfer of objects. Yet gifts seem to play just such a social function of relational glue.

---

283 Ashworth, “The Gift Relationship,” 27.

284 Ibid., 26.

285 Ibid.



When a gift is reduced to a mere exchange of objects or services (implicit or explicit), then it can longer be called a gift (credit Derrida). But this does not succeed in eliminating reciprocity from gift exchanges. Rather, it cautions one to give and reciprocate in an interpersonal way and not merely on the object level. For example, think of the gift of time that one offers to a loved one who is ill in bed. This is a gift of no object (like a present is), but it is a gift that acknowledges a relationship between the sick person and the loved one. When the loved one is better, how does the offering of a gesture of thanks (say a free dinner between the two), null the gift of presence that was offered? Further, how does this “transaction” fall into an exchange of goods between individuals that would make it economic? Derrida’s analysis misses the asymmetrical character of gift-exchange, which fundamentally offers a relationship from one person to another. What is returned is not the same relationship received, but one’s own relationship that may be similar, but can never be identical to the relationship received. As Schmitz has pointed out, through Emerson, a gift is an offering of the self, thus a return gift will always be non-identical.<sup>286</sup>

#### **4.2 Marion’s Vision**

Marion’s project of rescuing giftedness from Derrida, as we have seen, is predicated upon his ability to overcome Derrida’s aporias of reciprocity and intentionality, while at the same time securing for the gift a place to manifest itself as a phenomenon of our experience. Marion sees rightly that a gift is possible as a phenomenon of our experience and attempts to reveal its place. Marion, sees rightly that gifts should not be philosophically banished to the realm of

---

<sup>286</sup> Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 46. Such an analysis places gratitude back on the table as an appropriate, indeed a necessary, element of receiving, as well as makes it appropriate – without undoing the gift – to make a return gift to the giver.

impossibility. He hopes his method of bracketing allows him to conceive of the gift around the aporias of exchange and yet to still make room for the gift as part of our experience.

Marion has also seen that the real thing that is exchanged in gift-giving cannot be reduced to the gift-object.<sup>287</sup> Rather, this gift-object, manifests the immaterial aspect that is being exchanged (i.e. love, friendship etc.). As many scholars have argued, especially in response to Derrida, there is a convergence around this idea of true gifts being irreducible to the objects transferred (if any objects are actually transferred). Thus Marion adds a level of depth to the conversation around the gift that highlights this immaterial and symbolic nature of many – perhaps all – gifts. His analysis around sacrifice and forgiveness, in light of the paradigm of the gift, is quite brilliant.<sup>288</sup>

Further, Marion's larger project of reducing phenomena to reveal their inherent givenness, leads him to conclude that all phenomena manifest a reality independent from the human subject.<sup>289</sup> As a result, Marion seems to focus attention upon the idea of receptivity inherent within reality. This notion of reality, understood as given, while having a slightly different meaning, squares with Schmitz's and my own view that reality is best understood as gifted and thus to be received.<sup>290</sup> He goes so far as to say that reality, understood in terms of givenness, transforms the notion of the subject into the notion of the gifted.<sup>291</sup> The gifted

(subject) results when reality is conceived of as what Marion calls a saturated phenomenon and

<sup>287</sup> Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 104. See also Chapter three: Marion, *Negative Certainties*.

<sup>288</sup> Marion, *Negative Certainties*. See Chapter four.

<sup>289</sup> Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, 16–20. Marion does not want such givenness to be understood as a mere ontic given like an empiricist might want to see reality. Rather, through givenness, he means to reveal that which is given as being independent of our subjective mind and operating independent of ourselves.

<sup>290</sup> We disagree on the part of what this givenness points toward. Marion will not allow such givenness to point to any notion of transcendence or divine causality. I think that is precisely what such givenness does point to, unless it is taken as a brute fact and thus as meaningless or unintelligible.

its givenness.<sup>292</sup> Since phenomena are constituted as given, then when one encounters a phenomenon, one is no longer a subject, but a gifted-subject, by the very act of receiving the phenomenon. The gifted subject “receives himself from what gives itself.”<sup>293</sup> Marion’s argument tries to highlight how the radical nature of givenness, transforms even the notion of the subject, from self-constituting, to be constituted through receptivity and giftedness. Such a notion of giftedness and receptivity is similar to what I tried to outline in chapter three.

Yet his structure admits of certain blind spots. Marion’s method of reducing the gift to pure givenness, means that what is experienced and encountered – does not immediately manifest itself as gifted. Phenomena are experienced as given, and there is a further step of interpretation – or seeing – that requires the gifted character to manifest: which is where his principle of sacrifice comes into play. While it is undeniably true that most phenomena, and at times even existence, is experienced as a given and not as a gift; it seems that his method, if it remains on the level of phenomenology, cannot argue that what appears as given, should be understood as gifted. If it is true, that there is no distinction between what appears and what actually is, it seems that when something appears as a mere given, there is no room to argue that

---

291 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 262. He unpacks this idea in the final chapter of his book, *Being Given*, where he argues for his notion of saturated phenomena which transforms givenness into a call, and a subject into the gifted. This is not to read within any framework of transcendence, but rather that who or what does the calling is anonymous. This anonymous character of the caller does not negate, for Marion, that phenomena manifest a trait of givenness which calls out to be accepted, and when accepted transforms the subject into the gifted. This gifted subject even receives his own identity from the received call and phenomena.

292 Ibid., 266. This point Marion makes here in Chapter 4. A saturated phenomenon is best understood as a phenomenon that has an excess of intelligibility. Marion tries to build on the scholastic notion that God is not unintelligible, but super-intelligible (as discussed in Aquinas). In this way, Marion tries to lift phenomena from a causal structure. Marion makes the case that phenomena, while all understood as given, do not all give in the same way. There are poor, common and saturated phenomena. Examples of saturated phenomena are paradoxes, events, idols, icons, and even revelation. All of these surpass an ability to be conceptualized or fully grasped. The saturated phenomenon transforms the givenness into a call, and the receiver into the gifted. His reasons for such a claim are not entirely clear. The notion of the gifted makes sense within a notion of revelation, but it is not clear how events can transform a subject into a gifted subject.

293 Ibid., 296.

it should be understood and experienced as gifted. As long as the phenomenon and experienced is given primary place and not merely a place of priority, such a result is unavoidable.<sup>294</sup>

A few other problems result from Marion's description of the gift through the reduced frame. Marion is able to give concrete examples of gifts which phenomenologically bracket out either a giver or receiver – such as anonymous giving and receiving, he seems to too quickly universalize such an experience to include all gifted encounters. Yet, if such gifted scenario's are the only that are possible, this would have a two-fold effect: first, what actually constitutes a gift would be pushed to a few limited and particular cases; secondly, all commonly experienced gifted encounters would no longer be able to be considered as gifts (i.e. Christmas gifts). Thus, if Marion's structure succeeds, the gift is saved as a phenomenon of our experience, but exists in a much smaller domain. That would be reason enough to want to rethink the conditions of the gift. However, I think Marion's method of bracketing, as well as his vision of causality are problematic. Marion misses that his phenomenological method of bracketing causes two issues: one is with the method itself, and one is with the work it tries to do – remove the gift from a framework of causality.<sup>295</sup>

---

294 Marion, "The Other First Philosophy and the Question of Givenness." See also Kenneth Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/JP II* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993) 66-67.

295 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 161. Marion makes this point very clear in his writings. "Henceforth, the determination of the given phenomena as event without cause or reason will be seriously justified (and assessed) *only* by putting into question the principle of causality – and by giving it again its legitimate, limited role" (my emphasis). Marion's project of givenness succeeds or fails to the extent that he can overcome or reduce the notion of causality. See also Marion, "The Other First Philosophy and the Question of Givenness." In this article Marion argues that phenomenology is the only credible candidate for a first philosophy, thus his project is predicated upon the overthrow of the metaphysical framework. Further, Marion is indebted to Descartes (and implicitly Kant and Hume) for his understanding of causes. Much work has been done on each of these thinkers the problems with how they viewed causality. See Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. See also Bernard Lonergan S.J., *Insight*, ed. Doran Robert and Frederick Crowe, vol. 3, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 3* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

As Marion clearly states, it is overcoming the standard model of gifting according to causality – i.e. metaphysics – that is precisely his goal.<sup>296</sup> Marion's tries to think of the gift through the method of phenomenological bracketing. This method attempts to bracket out certain elements and then to try and think the gift without this element. But his method does not undermine such a framework – *per se* – only that it does not choose to focus on those elements in its analysis.<sup>297</sup> Physics brackets out biological considerations from its study of the universe. Reality is reduced to its traits of energy, motion etc. While this is useful for understanding what energy is, or how forces work in our world, this is not enough to claim that the human person (or any animal) is nothing but energy. One cannot understand the human person solely through the study of physics, or biology or the social sciences. Each contributes an element to the deeper understanding of the human person. The same might be said for Marion's method of bracketing. Its weakness is not in what it highlights, but what it forgets. Another practitioner of phenomenology makes a similar point.

Karol Wojtyla, eventually John Paul II, was a philosopher who had a phenomenological bent to his philosophy. Yet, despite his appreciation for phenomenology, he did not agree with certain approaches to bracketing and reduction. For him, the bracketing process was inclusive and illuminating of the whole, not a way of shedding unnecessary baggage.<sup>298</sup> As Schmitz writes:

bracketing for Wojtyla is an operation that takes one aspect of an integral being and, by placing it outside the bracketed totality, permits us to examine the totality by the way in

---

<sup>296</sup> Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 82.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 84. It is telling that Marion himself admits that bracketing allows one to *think* of the gift in a certain way. But the gift is more than just the thought or concept of it.

<sup>298</sup> Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/JP II*. “Rather, for Wojtyla, to place something before brackets is to put a certain factor in play in a prominent way, and in this sense, it is an inclusive operation.” Wojtyla was concerned with phenomenology's claim that the whole person could be reduced to consciousness. He rejected this and instead argued that reduction allowed the phenomenologist to study consciousness, but it must not be forgotten that a human is more than just his consciousness, he is a person.

which *the aspect affects everything in that totality*; the aspect that is placed before the brackets thereby receives enhanced power to illumine everything that remains within the brackets<sup>299</sup>

For Wotjyla, then, the process of bracketing is done to shed light on the whole through a better understanding of its parts. Such a view of bracketing presupposes things as a unity.<sup>300</sup> When bracketing out a feature for theoretical investigation, one must not lose sight of the thing that such a feature is part of *in reality*. Such an approach is useful, but risks misunderstanding the thing under investigation, if one forgets to place the bracketed part back from whence it came. To bracket out an aspect of a gift, in thought, does not result in bracketing out its actual role in reality. I believe Marion has been blind to such a risk in his method. One example from Marion's text will highlight this point.

Marion argues that a gift can be experienced, and thus *thought* of, apart from the notion of the giver.<sup>301</sup> His example of such a gift is that of an anonymous giver.<sup>302</sup> Because a receiver does not experience or encounter the giver in such a scenario, Marion claims that the giver has been phenomenologically bracketed. In such a situation, the gift is prevented from falling into a paradigm of exchange. While this is undoubtedly true, what is at issue is whether Marion is able to argue that the giver can be bracketed as a cause of the gift? The giver is not unnecessary to the gift, even if he remains unknown or unknowable. The gift cannot be thought, or actually exist,

---

299 Ibid., 68. My emphasis.

300 Lonergan S.J., *Insight*. Bernard Lonergan argues for the constitutive unity of things in *Insight* – especially chapter 5. This is also a philosophic notion that the whole is greater than its parts. Another ally in this point is the linguistic philosopher Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Chapter one he writes that breaking up a broom into its various components does not shed greater light on the function of the broom as a whole. Rather the broom retains an intelligibility and function, not reducible to its parts.

301 It is unclear if Marion means without a giver existing, or if such a bracketing is only in the order of knowledge. His analysis sides on the conclusion that bracketing a giver highlights that a giver is causally unnecessary. Marion will even call such non-necessary conditions that attach to concepts or things as parasitic.

302 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 85.

outside of a giver enacting the gift. The gift did not happen in spite of, or unconnected from a giver, but rather *because of the giver* offering his money as a gift. The giver cannot be bracketed from the gift-process causally, but only from the mind of the receiver, as an effect or as an epistemic reality. This bracketing does not reduce the essential role a giver plays in the gift, it merely allows Marion to focus upon a certain type of gift process. A gift can exist without the identity of the giver being known to the recipient, it is doubtful that such a giver remains extrinsic or unnecessary to the gifting process itself. None of Marion's examples reveal a gift that exists without an actual giver.<sup>303</sup> Marion's methodology of bracketing, further, does not do the work for him that he desires (i.e. removing the gift from causality). Rather, it reveals Marion's conception of causality to be only epistemic, and not ontic. Such a vision is problematic.

Marion conceives of causality as merely an epistemological function: "causes offer reason for effects, but solely in terms of intelligibility...causes therefore serve the purely epistemological function of subsequently producing the evidence for the effects."<sup>304</sup> For Marion, effects are "epistemologically dependent on causes" yet they do not seem to be ontologically dependent upon causes.<sup>305</sup> Causes, are assigned to effects through our human will to know, and thus they come after the experienced effect. As a result, phenomenology focuses on the effect that is experienced not on the cause that results from our desire to know.<sup>306</sup> No proponent of

---

303 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Marion admits this as such when he concludes that a gift, which offers itself to consciousness, must have either a giver or receiver (although both for him are not necessary). He concludes, at the end of *Being Given*, that a receiver is what is most necessary, because a gift is incomplete without its reception and thus a receiver becomes necessary for a gift. This seems to undermine the conclusions of bracketing, but Marion does not address this. See also Chapter 5. Marion, *Negative Certainties*.

304 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 165.

305 Ibid.

306 Ibid., 166.

causes would argue that causes are sometimes unknown, or that they come to be known after the experienced effect. What is at issue, is if causes exist prior to their effects, and if causes are a feature of reality or are a mere human projection onto reality. Marion both denies causal priority as well as causal reality – he sees them as merely a ‘concept of understanding.’<sup>307</sup> Marion unpacks further problematics with the notion of causes, but this is his central objection.<sup>308</sup> Marion wants to understand causality as a mere epistemological reality, and not have it understood to hold any ontological weight or priority.<sup>309</sup> Marion will use such an understanding to argue that a gift possess no trace of a giver, because it is not causally dependent upon a giver, only epistemically dependent. It is here that any serious response to Marion’s framework, on givenness or the gift, would need to do battle. It is here that we will offer some brief remarks that reveal some weaknesses in Marion’s conception of causality.<sup>310</sup>

Oliva Blanchette observes that causality, in the modern period, tends to reduce causality to merely external causes.<sup>311</sup> Causation is seen only in terms of efficient causality, or that causality which brings about motion. Marion himself falls into this conception, which is evidenced by his reliance on Descartes and Kant for his understanding of causes, as well as his belief that the causal framework can be exceeded by positing things as self-contained, or self-

---

307 Marion, “The Other First Philosophy and the Question of Givenness,” 787.

308 Marion argues that effects come before causes; that effects exceed what is potential in their causes (i.e. no principle of proportionate causality), and even that causes and effects are distinct and separate (see a Humean influence here).

309 As far as I can tell, Marion has never backed off this reduction of causality to the epistemic realm.

310 Marion argues for cause being only epistemically related to effects; for them being loose and distinct; and for effects being uncaused; and for effects exceeding their causes. I will not try and reply to each of these points. I will focus upon causes as loose and distinct and Marion’s epistemic claims.

311 Blanchette, *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*, 371. Feser makes this same point. Edward Feser, “Teleology: A Shopper’s Guide,” *Philosophia Christi* 12, no. 1 (2010): 142–59. Bernard Lonergan argues on similar lines regarding the intrinsic presence of causality in *Insight*; David Oderberg further discusses the point in: David Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2007).



giving, entities. Marion's argument which seeks for internal construction of the gift and givenness, does not escape causality, especially if causality is understood as having an internal as well as an external dimension.<sup>312</sup> However, if we limit our discussion to external causality, Marion's framework still admits of problems.

Blanchette notices that external causality is predicated upon the conception of reality which admits of difference.<sup>313</sup> Since there are different things, beings, objects, then the question arises do these different things communicate or interact? If they do then how? Causality arises in response to the latter question after the former is affirmed. A causal framework is engendered in an attempt to understand how such beings interact. Thus, extrinsic causes attempt to explain the interactions, or communications, between beings. It is not primarily an epistemic framework, but rather: "to speak of the efficient cause as the cause whence something else comes is not to presuppose a temporal priority of the cause over the effect, but only an ontological priority, and thus a real dependence of determination in the effect."<sup>314</sup> This is not to exclude an epistemic value to a causal explanation, but it is highlighting that a causal framework argues for a real dependence between causes and effects.<sup>315</sup> This may result simultaneously, or temporally prior, but it is always ontologically prior.

Aristotle, who first proffered the theory of four causes, did say that we know about a thing when we know its causes.<sup>316</sup> This claim – while not cited by Marion – gives apparent

---

312 Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. Feser's text argues convincingly for a return to the four-fold causal structure instead of the modern reductionist understanding of causes as efficient only. Feser argues that such a return to this framework is being seen in non-scholastic philosophy as well as in some scientific research and thought.

313 Blanchette, *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*, 373.

314 Ibid., 423.

315 Ibid., 428.

316 Aristotle, *Aristotle Selected Works. Physics*, book II chapter III. And again in *Metaphysics*, book I chapter III.

credence to his epistemic understanding of causes. It is true, within the framework of causality, that knowledge of a thing's cause(s), brings knowledge of the thing itself, and often comes after the experience of the effect. Yet such knowledge does not exclude, but *presupposes* that these causes actually have an ontological relation to the effect. It goes without saying that effects are often known, or experienced, before their causes are evident. Further, causes are sought for their epistemic value, in that we seek out a cause to know more about the effect. However, the claim that something is a cause of this or that effect, is not purely a claim about knowledge, but also about reality.<sup>317</sup> Marion is right that the causal explanation does follow the effect in the order of knowledge, but it *precedes* the effect (or is simultaneous with it and in either case is related to the effect) in the ontological order. Yet his claim is precisely that he has overcome causality in the ontological realm.

Marion, as a phenomenologist, is concerned with a distinct field of investigation – that of experience, effects, and what he will call givenness. But in his attempt to isolate this field, he also will try and argue that it is the primary field of investigation, that there is nothing more primary. The field of givenness, discovered through reduction, reveals things as they are – independent of the conscious subject. It is the latter claim that admits of problems. To reduce reality to the effect experienced, misses that in order to experience an effect, there must also have been a cause that brought this effect into being. As our appeal to Blanchette attempted to

---

<sup>317</sup> For example, if I see that my lawn is wet, yet do not know if it was caused by rain or my sprinkler, I would be ignorant of the cause of how my lawn came to be wet. Yet, if I investigate the situation, and notice that my whole lawn is wet, and not just the part that my sprinklers reached, I might conclude that the rain caused my lawn to become wet. Epistemically my discovery of the cause of the lawn comes after the effect of the lawn being wet, but the rain itself *qua* cause preceded – temporally and ontologically – my lawn being wet. Most importantly the effect of my lawn actually being wet, depended upon the rain causing it.

Blanchette, *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*, 423. As Blanchette explains, 432, such an understanding should not be misunderstood to fall into the trap of determinism. One reasons from effects back to causes, instead of prognosticating from a cause to its effect. Given that the lawn is wet, it must have had a cause that brought this about. This is not to say that the lawn has to be wet in the first place. Causal relations do not preclude freedom nor do they posit determinism, rather one committed to the reality of causal relations holds that if there is an effect, there must – of necessity – be a cause. He does not hold that an effect or a cause must act.

demonstrate, once we posit a world of difference, the question of how different things – within such a world – interact and encounter one another arises. This is precisely the question causality attempts to address on the metaphysical level and this is precisely the question Marion seems to want to bracket. This seems to miss, or forget, that causality – as a metaphysical reality – is necessarily presupposed by any experienced effect. Two examples might suffice to hone in on this distinction that the phenomenological realm rests upon the metaphysical realm.

Marion claims that some phenomenon can occur without cause. Marion quotes a poet who describes the rush of pleasure and feeling that the eating and drinking of his favorite foods brought about in him. “An exquisite pleasure had invaded my sense, but individual, detached, with *no suggestion of its cause*.”<sup>318</sup> Marion takes this as a quintessential example of an event imposing itself on a person without cause – as pure given. But even in the poet’s very words, what preceded these feeling was his action of eating and drinking.<sup>319</sup> The poet may have been unconcerned, or ignorant, of what brought about this feeling, but within his own story the cause of his pleasure is the eating and drinking of the food. The effect of pleasure is brought about by the interaction of the food and drink with his mind and body. Causal interaction can be unknown and yet ignorance of a cause does not obliterate its reality. Marion’s example does not prove the causal relation does not hold, he just chooses to focus on other aspects. The causal relation still exists even if it is unknown.

The second example is Marion’s discussion of the gift seen as a pure given. Here Marion claims that the gift gives itself internally. By this he means to argue that such a giving is not to be understood, nor explained, by any reference to a causal framework. The gift catches the gaze

---

318 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 169.

319 Ibid.

of the giver and declares itself to be givable; on behalf of the receiver the gift catches his gaze and reveals itself to be acceptable. Thus, for Marion, a gift can be constituted without any causal dependence between giver and receiver. Yet this analysis does not do the work he desires, it merely pushes the question of causality onto the gift. Is not the gift the causal protagonist within his description? If the gift, as phenomenon, is an uncaused cause, this does not prevent it from causing other things to happen (i.e. the giving and receiving between subjects). In other words, what is the relation between the gift and the giver, on one hand, and the gift and the receiver on the other? If phenomena do not interact with one another then Marion's non-causal system would hold. But then, such a world, would be isolated and seemingly static.<sup>320</sup> If they do interact then some of the questions we raised here, around causality, beg to be answered. This takes us to the final point of Marion's causal framework that is problematic: his denial of intentionality within the gift-process.

Marion wants to think of the gift apart from any intentionality and thus he makes of the gift a strange phenomenon. The gift, for Marion, is characterized by internal principles which allow the gift to be wrested from any dependence, and thus to have no trace, of a giver or transcendent source. However, such a move has two central objections. The first objection to such a claim is that – for a phenomenologist – such a conclusion seems to contradict the gift phenomenon itself. A gift, as commonly given, seems to be extrinsically given its giveability.<sup>321</sup>

---

<sup>320</sup> Marion does not argue for such a static world: he thinks there is interaction and communication between phenomena. Since a gift interacts with a giver and a receiver, the gift would be the uncaused cause of the gift process. Either way, causal language or explanation is not avoided. Marion seems to want interaction between things, subjects, or phenomenon, and yet at the same time, he resists any causal language to explain this interaction. I do not see how he can escape such a situation. Either things interact, and this interaction is causal, or things do not interact (which brings about further problems). Understanding something as pure given, does not explain how such a given interacts with other given things.

<sup>321</sup> As when I decide to give this book to my friend, in light of my friend's interest in literature. I impose the category of gift onto the book through my choice, in light of my desire to give it to my friend.

However, this objection aside, and if we grant a gift as having an internal finality of givenness, which would be especially relevant for living things, we can ask if such intrinsic finality points to a giver or if it is completely self-constituting? In other words, does such a movement of placing causality within the gift, actually avoid the need for a giver or get rid of a trace of a giver? This is to raise the question of final causality.

Classically, as Edward Feser highlights, final causality admits of internal and external distinctions.<sup>322</sup> This is best seen through an example. Clay can be made into a mug. When it is so made, this clay is given an extrinsic finality of being used as a mug for drinking. But there is nothing intrinsic to clay that necessitates it being made into a mug. The finality of the mug is imposed on the clay, and thus, is extrinsic to it. On the other hand, a watermelon seed will naturally – all things being equal – grow into a watermelon. There is an intrinsic finality within the seed that directs it toward becoming a watermelon. Now a thing's end or goal is always extrinsic, but its principle of finality can be natural or imposed.<sup>323</sup> Marion, in his conception of the gift, clearly moves finality, and thus causality, inwards with his principles of givability and acceptability.

Internal finality is directedness towards an end – always extrinsic to it – but it is not attainment of that end. Efficient causality, or agent causality, is that which actualizes a potency in a thing. Efficient causality is always extrinsic to the potency which it actualizes (even in self-movers).<sup>324</sup> Thus a gift, even if it is internally directed toward givenness, needs to be actualized by an external giver or receiver and thus would bear the trace – or dependence – upon this

---

<sup>322</sup> Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 88.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

actualization. Thus an acorn needs light, water, and time to mature into an oak. On a deeper level, it needs its existence, which it itself cannot cause (as we argued for in Chapter two). Thus that fact that it is, even if it has a principle of internal finality, does not negate a trace of the transcendent. If, as Marion prefers, the gift is not potentially giving, but actually giving, then Marion conceives of gifts as pure actuality and thus non-contingent, which contradicts his argument that phenomena (including gifts) are contingent. In so far as a gift has an origin, it admits of potency, and thus stands in need of actualization. Any actualization will refer extrinsically to the efficient cause that brought it into existence. Thus, even if something has internal finality or directedness, it still admits of an agent which brings into being the process towards a thing's final cause.

Marion's structure does not seem to do the work that he desires – the removal of the gift, and all phenomena – from the clutches of metaphysics and causality. He merely brackets the question – which is valid, but not an argument for invalidating the question altogether. As a result, he either leaves the gift within the framework of Derrida's aporias, or he has reduced the gift to exist in a slim facet of experience – only those cases where the receiver or giver is unknown by the other epistemically. Phenomena – understood as given – remain undetermined in their meaning, they may be a gift or they may not. Any understanding of what is given, as that which is actually a gift, seems to rely on the phenomenon appearing as such to the individual. But what actually causes it to appear as such, and how one can be moved to see it as such, are questions Marion leaves unaddressed.

Further, for both of them relationality, and thus reciprocity, is a problem to be overcome and not constitutive of the gift itself. Unable to conceive of a framework in which gratuity and reciprocity can mutually coexist within the gift, both conceive of gifted structures that do include

it. Such a result undermines what seems so constitutive of any gifted scenario. A fuller response to these two respected thinkers, as we mentioned, goes beyond the scope of this paper; however, on account of how the gift is left and – consequently – how the gifted character of existence is lost, I think a more fruitful approach is needed to approach the gift. Schmitz’s notion of the gift allows for a greater predication of the term, as well as avoid the negative characterization of reciprocity – which both thinkers found problematic about the gift.

## Conclusion

We began our paper by discussing the curious philosophical fact that things exist. This question, or problem of existence, led us to a positing of various philosophical stances that could, and have been taken, in regards to existence: gifted, burdensome, meaningless. We tried to argue for existence being seen as a gift, but to do this we needed to discuss how giftedness had been treated philosophically over the past half century. This led to an exploration of three central philosophers on the gift: Derrida, Marion, and Schmitz. We found that the notion of the gift had undergone much philosophical scrutiny in the post-modern era, and we argued that such analysis – while not absent of fruit – left the gift in a precarious position. This is certainly true when it is to be predicated of existence.

Derrida’s framework denies the possibility of existence being a gift.<sup>325</sup> Existence could never be understood, nor received as a gift, because then it would bring with it an obligation, and thus a burden. Further, if it was possible to understand existence as a gift, within such a framework, it could only be along the lines of pure gratuity. Derrida’s removal of exchange as constitutive of the gift, collapses the gift into one of its poles: complete gratuity. If giftedness is

---

325 Schmitz, “An Addendum to Further Discussion,” 283. Schmitz makes this point against Derrida “Derrida concludes that there can be no originary gift, since its reception would already degrade it into an exchange.”

predicated of existence, life itself would have no intrinsic meaning. Thus, the pure gratuity of existence, obliges creatures in no way, making no demands on them, and can be utilized as each creature sees fit. For Derrida, Existence cannot be known to be a gift, otherwise it would become a burden. Existence cannot be a gift, or if it is allowed to be, it cannot be given for any purpose, or make any claim on the one who has received it.

Marion's conception of the gift, within the phenomenological framework of reduction and givenness, reduces the gift to a phenomenon, an experience, and an effect. The frame of givenness reveals that what is encountered or experienced is not constituted by the one who receives it. In terms of existence, this would appear to make the question – as to whether it is gifted, burdensome or meaningless – indiscernible for Marion's phenomenology. Or, more accurately, phenomenology would take into account existence being understood along any of these three experiences, but would not be able to offer any argument for adjudicating which one existence ought to be understood as. Existence, undoubtedly, gives itself, or is experienced by people in different and even contradictory ways. It seems telling that, for Marion, phenomena, understood according to givenness, cannot be definitively understood as gifted.<sup>326</sup> The gifted interpretation is one among many. Marion attempts to argue for the gifted character of all phenomena, especially in his principle of sacrifice and forgiveness (as well as his notion of the saturated phenomenon). However, he never settles the question of why – and how – one, who experiences existence in a contradictory way, ought to 'understand' it as gifted. How, and why, should one, who experiences existence as a burden, seek to understand it as a gift? Should existence, which may appear as burdensome or meaningless, be understood as a gift? Marion might be said to argue for a phenomenology of the gift, but such argumentation seems to be

---

326 See footnote #89.



immediately undercut, on the phenomenological level, by anyone who does not experience existence, or any aspect of reality, as gifted.

Schmitz's metaphysics of the gift argued for reality being constituted – at its core – by the gift of existence. He argued for such a claim from a two-fold approach. He first sought to understand the phenomenon of the gift as it manifests itself in our human experience. Through this investigation, he tried to develop a conceptual framework for the gift, and then he proceeded to see if such a framework could be widened to include interactions beyond the merely human. This he did through an understanding of the gift analogously. After having unpacked the phenomenon of the gift, Schmitz went on to argue for existence being understood as a gift. This he did with an appeal to the metaphysics of St. Anselm and St. Thomas.

Through Thomas' distinction between existence and essence, Schmitz sought to ground his phenomenological experience of the gift within a claim about reality as a whole. St. Anselm's distinction around privation, helped Schmitz to argue against the claim that existence should be understood as a burden. Schmitz thought that an understanding of God as Love, allowed phenomenology and metaphysics to fruitfully interact with one another – grounding experience in reality, and bringing reality to life within the fold of our experience.<sup>327</sup> A metaphysics of the gift cannot guarantee that one experiences existence as gifted. I think Schmitz would agree with Marion that no receiver can be forced to accept – or to see – that what is given is actually a gift. However, Schmitz attempts to offer an argument for why existence should be understood as a gift, and thus to challenge one – who experiences it as a burden – to seek to see life in a new way. For Schmitz, this new way of seeing existence, as a gift, is not a blind leap, or a naïve

---

<sup>327</sup> See Chapter 2 and 3 for how Schmitz sees phenomenology and metaphysics fruitfully interacting on the level of Ethics and anthropology. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/JP II*. See also a collection of his essays: Schmitz, *The Texture of Being: Essays in First Philosophy*.

ignoring of life's problems, it is an understanding, rooted in a metaphysical vision: existence is that which has been offered as a gift to be received and lived out in relationship.<sup>328</sup>

Phenomenology concedes too much to the subjective, whereas metaphysics runs the risk of focusing exclusively on the objective side of reality.<sup>329</sup> For Schmitz, then, the two need one another – and he attempted to reveal this through his discussion of the gift. The site of the gift, and existence understood as a gift, provides a site of dialogue for phenomenology and metaphysics.

The implications of Schmitz's metaphysics of the gift, of seeing existence as gifted, extends far beyond our discussion here. Such a metaphysics of the gift, if valid, would open up interesting lines of reflection within philosophical anthropology and ethics. Schmitz himself argued from seeing existence as gifted, to an understanding of the person (and all creation) as that which is fundamentally constituted by receptivity and thus the creature as that which is sheer receiving.<sup>330</sup> He understood the human person as fundamentally receptive, and thus oriented toward others and also the divine.<sup>331</sup> The double receptivity of the creature – existence and corporality – provide fruitful paths of reflection around questions of identity, personhood, and even ethics. An ethics of the gift, would find its grounding in a metaphysics of the gift, in that existence – understood as gift – would entail that the creature seek to bring the gift of his

328 This is not to deny that Schmitz's vision is also informed by his faith, but his mode of argumentation is not theological, but philosophical.

329 Schmitz, "Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete," 3.

330 Schmitz, "Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete." See also, Schmitz, "The First Principles of Personal Becoming." For his claim he received some pushback from the Thomistic community see, Stephen A. Long, "Personal Receptivity and Act: A Thomistic Critique," *The Thomist* 97, no. 1 (1997): 1–20. But Schmitz was not alone in arguing for receptivity as constitutive of personhood and thus of how a metaphysics of the gift could shed light on anthropology. David Schindler, "Norris Clarke On Person, Being, and St. Thomas," *Communio* 20, no. 3 (1993): 580–92. See his book on the thought of John Paul II for how a metaphysics of the gift can be applied to ethics. Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyła/JP II*.

331 See his essay "the Geography of the Human Person" in: Schmitz, *The Texture of Being: Essays in First Philosophy*. 149-167.

existence to fulfillment according to discerned and experienced intentions of the giver. Ethics would become a response of the creature to the giver, a gifting of one's unique self to other persons as well as to God. The creature, constituted by a donation of existence and act, is thus called to act to give as a response – in gratitude. In sum, there are fruitful lines of reflection along this path that transcend the scope of this paper. What is essential to note is that a metaphysics of existence as gift is not an esoteric pursuit or conclusion, but one that can open up fruitful avenues within other philosophical disciplines.

Schmitz was convinced that the site of the gift could provide fruitful interactions between modern interests and concerns, as well as older frameworks and wisdom.<sup>332</sup> It is certainly true that post-modern thinkers have been focused upon the notion of the gift as both a site of the impossible, as well as, an inherent human desire and ubiquitous cultural manifestation. Yet what is missing is an ability to predicate the gift of existence, because of how giftedness – and existence – is understood. Thus, to bring existence and the gift together, Schmitz needed to draw upon an older wisdom that helped him frame the gift anew and make it able to, once again, be wedded to existence. Schmitz thought that creaturely existence, precisely as something received, situated the creature between two poles: nothingness and eternity.<sup>333</sup> Since our existence is received, it is outside our control – we are radically contingent and thus can feel that we are on the edge of sheer nothingness. Yet existence, as received, brings us into reality – and thus into eternity. Existence opens us up toward the source of our existence – the divine – and calls us to respond. Thus, it is only existence, understood as giftedness, which can fruitfully orient the person within these two poles. Existence, understood as a gift, births gratitude which prevents us

---

<sup>332</sup> Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, 90, 118–121. In particular around the notions of act and potency, as well as causality, and interiority of nature.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

from collapsing existence into either of its poles: the pole of nothingness without eternity leads to despair, whereas the pole of eternity without nothingness leads to radical autonomy and arrogance.

For Schmitz despair and arrogance are improper – and dangerous – responses to our existence. His remedy is to argue for existence understood as a gift, and a gift understood as a relational act which draws people both, out of themselves and towards the other, just as every creature was first drawn out of nothingness into existence – through a gift – and in existence is drawn toward the source of that gift.

## Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. *On Being and Essence*. Translated by Armand Maurer. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968.
- Aristotle. *Aristotle Selected Works*. Translated by Hippocrates Apostle and Lloyd Gerson. 3rd ed. Grinnell, Iowa: Peripatetic Press, 1991.
- Ashworth, P.D. "The Gift Relationship." *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1–36.
- Blanchette, Oliva. *Philosophy of Being: A Reconstructive Essay in Metaphysics*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003.
- Caputo, John D. "Commentary on Ken Schmitz; 'Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition.'" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1999): 253–59.
- Caputo, John D, and Michael J. Scanlon, eds. *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Champetier, Charles. "Philosophy of the Gift: Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2001): 15–22.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

- Dupre, Louis. "The Gift and the Giving." In *Person, Being & History: Essays in Honor of Kenneth L. Schmitz*, edited by Michael Baur and Robert E. Wood, 48–56. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012.
- Feser, Edward. *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*. Germany: editiones scholasticae, 2014.
- . "Teleology: A Shopper's Guide." *Philosophia Christi* 12, no. 1 (2010): 142–59.
- Gilson, Etienne. *Being and Some Philosophers*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952.
- . *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1937.
- Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Edited by Arnold Davidson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1995.
- Henry, Michel, Joseph Rivera, and George E. Faithful. "The Four Principles of Phenomenology." *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (2015): 1–21.
- Horner, Robyn. *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2001.
- Kow, James. "The Philosophy of Kenneth Schmitz: The Recovery and Discovery of Things, Being, and the Person." In *Person, Being & History: Essays in Honor of Kenneth L. Schmitz*, edited by Robert E. Wood and Michael Baur, 3–47. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011.
- Lonergan S.J., Bernard. *Insight*. Edited by Doran Robert and Frederick Crowe. Vol. 3. Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan 3. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.
- Long, Stephen A. "Personal Receptivity and Act: A Thomistic Critique." *The Thomist* 97, no. 1 (1997): 1–20.
- MacDonald, Scott Charles. "The Esse/Essentia Argument in Aquina's De Ente et Essentia." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984): 157–72.
- Malo, Antonio. "The Limits of Marion's and Derrida's Philosophy of the Gift." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 52, no. 206 (2012): 149–68.
- Manolopoulos, Mark. "Derrida's Gift to Eco/Theo/Logy: A Critical Tribute." *Cross Currents* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 50–67.
- . "Gift Theory as Cultural Theory: Reconciling the Irreligious." *Culture and Religion* 8, no. 1 (2007): 1–13.
- . *If Creation Is a Gift*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.
- Marcel, Gabriel. *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery*. Gifford Lectures 1. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Translated by Jeffrey Kosky. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- . *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion*. Edited by Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- . *Negative Certainties*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- . "The Other First Philosophy and the Question of Givenness." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 784–800.
- . *The Reason of the Gift*. Translated by Stephen E. Lewis. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by Ian Cunnison. London: Cohen & West, 1970.
- Miczo, Nathan. "The Human Condition and the Gift: Towards a Theoretical Perspective on Close Relationships." *Hum Stud* 31 (2008): 133–55. doi:10.1007/s10746-008-9084-y.
- Milbank, John. "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic." *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (1995): 119–61.
- Oderburg, David. "Hylomorphic Dualism." *Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation*, 2005, 69–99.

- . *Real Essentialism*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Schindler, David. "Norris Clarke On Person, Being, and St. Thomas." *Communio* 20, no. 3 (1993): 580–92.
- Schmitz, Kenneth. "An Addendum to Further Discussion." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1999): 277–90.
- . *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/JP II*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993.
- . "Created Receptivity and the Philosophy of the Concrete." *The Thomist* 61 (1997): 339–72.
- . "Enriching the Copula." In *Texture of Being: Essays in First Philosophy*, edited by Paul O'Herron. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007.
- . "Postmodernism and the Catholic Tradition." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1999): 233–52.
- . "Postmodern or Modern-Plus?" *Communio* 17, no. Summer (1990): 152–66.
- . *Recovery of Wonder: The New Freedom and the Asceticism of Power*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005.
- . "Semiotics or Metaphysics as First Philosophy? Triadic or Dyadic Relations in Regard to 'Four Ages of Understanding.'" *Semiotica* 179, no. 1 (2010): 119–32.
- . "The First Principles of Personal Becoming." *Review of Metaphysics* 47, no. 4 (1994): 757–66.
- . *The Gift: Creation*. 5th ed. Marquette, WI: Marquette University Press, 1982.
- . "The Given and The Gift: Two Readings of the World." In *The Human Person and Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, edited by Joseph Zycinski, 1:260–77. Krakow: Pontifical Faculty of Theology/Philosophical Section, 1980.
- . "The God of Love." *The Thomist* 57, no. 1 (1993): 497–508.
- . *The Texture of Being: Essay in First Philosophy*. Edited by Paul O'Herron. Vol. 46. Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007.
- . "Transcendental and Empirical Pressures in Human Subjectivity." *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy Fordham University Quarterly* 56, no. 222 (1981): 272–86.
- . "Weiss and Creation." *Review of Metaphysics* 18, no. 1 (1964): 147–69.
- Webb, Stephen. *The Gifting God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Wippel, John. "Aquinas' Route to the Real Distinction: A Note on 'De Ente et Essentia.'" *The Thomist* 43, no. 2 (1979): 279–92.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. 4th ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009.