

The Limits of Marion's and Derrida's Philosophy of the Gift

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ABSTRACT: Is it possible to think of the gift philosophically? How should we think of the gift in a world that seems to be regulated only with economic rules? These are two of the main questions that are treated in this essay. In order to deal with them, the author analyzes Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the gift and Jean-Luc Marion's notion of givenness. Derrida and Marion are in agreement in refusing intentionality as an essential element of the logic of gift because for them intentionality is always connected with economy. But they conceive economics in different ways and, as a consequence, their conceptions of gift are different. For Derrida, economics means credit and debit, while for Marion it means causality. This difference is the reason why Derrida thinks of the gift as either impossible or a moment of madness that overcomes credit and debit, while Marion thinks of it as a pure decision that comes from its givenness. As a result, for neither author does the gift have any element of need, motivation, or cause. The author argues that excess and decision cannot be the essence of the gift, but only reciprocity. This reciprocity is not an economic relation of giving and receiving but an asymmetrical reciprocity.

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT topics of postmodern philosophy is the gift. There are different reasons offered for why the gift has assumed such an important place. One might just point at our current social and economic problems. Environmental destruction, the economic crisis, and the fluidity of society are problems that arise from a culture based on a business mentality. Analyses that concentrate excessively on these issues do not tend to take into account even the possibility of a real gift.

To understand the origin of this kind of culture one should look at the modern understanding of God and man. According to this sort of view, God is infinitely powerful and can do *whatever* he wants. Presumably God created the world in order to show that infinite power. Being created in his image, the human being pretends to imitate that omnipotence. Although humans do not have an infinite power, they are able to achieve dominion over much of the world. What flows from this understanding is that in this world there is room only for a nominalist vision of goodness and values, with special focus on pleasure and utility. Such other values as truth, goodness, beauty, dignity, and friendship, which have no place in this nominalist vision of the world are empty concepts. They are merely names without any real content.

But human beings cannot live in a world where pleasure and utility are the only values. Without any reference to other values the human world will be destroyed. And thus human beings will not be able to flourish. They flourish only when they

can give themselves to others, and especially by giving themselves to God from who everything proceeds as a gift.

Therefore, the philosophy of the gift allows us to understand how a culture that has lost the logic of donation is unable to survive precisely. It will not be human enough. But the philosophical study of the gift can provide some important ideas about how to deal with the current crisis of values.

Is it possible to think of the gift philosophically? How should we think of the gift in a world that seems to be regulated with other rules? These are two of the main questions that I will try to answer in this essay. In order to deal with them, I am going to analyze Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the gift and Jean-Luc Marion's notion of givenness. I will then indicate why deconstruction and givenness fail to capture the very essence of gift: a reciprocity that is asymmetrical.

DECONSTRUCTION OF THE GIFT

There are difficulties in thinking about gift whenever we try to understand it from a post-modern point of view. For instance, Derrida considers the gift as problematic because he finds it impossible to think of gifts outside of an economic logic. Even the reception involved in the concept of a gift seems to him to produce some residue of exchange, like a value, a symbol, or an intention.

According to Derrida, however, if there were to be a gift, it must not include any return. In his opinion this necessity does not mean that the gift has nothing to do with economics, but simply that it is in a dialectical relation: the gift has a relation to economics insofar as it is the negation of the circulation of the goods.¹ On this topic he writes:

If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must keep a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible.²

Moreover, in Derrida's view the gift is not something impossible. It is the very figure of the impossible: a wish to go out of the economic circle that inhabits the circle of time. It would follow that the gift could only be possible if there existed an instant from where the circle were broken.³

Derrida begins by asking for the conditions of possibility of the gift. According to him, in order to grasp the essence of the gift, or at least what is normally thought

¹This strange relation is something like space in paintings. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago IL: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 11–12: "neither inside nor outside, it spaces itself without letting itself be framed but it does not stand outside the frame. It works the frame, makes it work, lets it work, gives it work to do (let, make, and give will be my most misunderstood words in this book)."

²Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 7.

³Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 9: "There would be a gift only at the instant when the *paradoxical* instant (in the sense in which Kierkegaard says of the *paradoxical* instant of decision that it is madness) tears time apart. In this sense one would never have the time of a gift."

under this name, three elements are needed: the giver or donor of the gift, the recipient or receiver, and the gift itself, which also includes the gift-object as a part of the gift. Derrida thinks that without these elements a gift is impossible. But for him the juxtaposition of these three elements generates a paradox that makes the gift impossible. In other words, the very possibility of gift is annulled in the recognition of its incompatible conditions of possibility. Let us follow Derrida's demonstration of this thesis, beginning with his account of the receiver.

A. *The Receiver*

In Derrida's opinion, in order to think of the possibility of a gift, a receiver is needed. Otherwise one cannot even speak of a gift: a gift that is not received by someone is no gift at all. On the other hand, according to Derrida, the recipient somehow has to be unaware of the gift that 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. According to Derrida, to be in debt is not to receive a gift but something poisonous.⁴ In Derrida's opinion, for a gift to exist, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, and above all no debt. Otherwise the gift cannot escape the economic cycle.⁵ To recognize a gift as a gift would require that one give something back, at least in a symbolic form—something like gratitude—and that would immediately constitute a kind of exchange.

But can we really speak of there being a gift at all if it has to be unknown? Derrida analyzes two possibilities of such an unknown gift: a misunderstood gift (something that is given but not recognized as a gift) and an unappreciated gift (something received as a gift but not wanted).⁶ According to him, in both cases there would be no gift. In the first case, there would be no gift because nothing has been recognized as a gift. For instance, even though food or medical treatment can be given to animals, one cannot say they have received some gift, for they are unable to recognize these things as such. In the second case, there is also no gift. Although what was given has been recognized, it has not been accepted. In fact, in order to refuse something as a gift, one would have to know it as such. In Derrida's view this knowledge is a way of returning the gift to its origin, and this in turn implies its destruction.

A second argument against the very possibility of the gift is based on the receiver's condition. According to Derrida, being the receiver of a gift means to feel urged to give something back. But, for Derrida, the essence of a gift requires that the recipient will try to give nothing back to the giver. Otherwise the gift as gift would be cancelled. For, in Derrida's opinion, as soon as it enters into a situation of exchange (return, counter-gift), the gift as such disappears.

⁴Derrida here plays with the two meanings of the word "gift": the etymological ("poison") that survives in German and the existential one ("present" or *Gabe*). The Greek *dosis*, from which "dose" is derived, contains both meanings: "present" and "poison."

⁵Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 13: "There is gift, if there is any, only in what interrupts the system as well as the symbol, in a partition without return and without division [*répartition*], without being-with-self of the gift-counter-gift."

⁶See Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris, France: Galilée, 1987), pp. 159–202.

It would appear that in this regard Derrida is criticizing Marcel Mauss for not seeing that his idea of gift cancels the gift itself. Mauss's idea of gift has a three-part structure: giving, receiving, and returning.⁷ According to him, returning is the very key to the gift.⁸ Therefore, the gift belongs to the economic cycle. Of course, for Mauss, this returning does not have to be immediate; otherwise it could be interpreted as a desire, for instance, to have nothing to do with the giver. For that reason, Mauss thinks that the return of the gift may need to be postponed. It is true that Mauss does not think that the gift causes obligations, but simply some sort of bond between the giver and the receiver. By contrast, Derrida considers that a bond implies an exchange, or at least the expectation of an exchange, while the gift must exclude any kind of exchange if it is to exhibit absolute gratuity.

Derrida accepts the possibility of a delay in one's response, for he thinks that the requirement of delay is "inscribed in the thing itself" that constitutes a gift. But for him this delay does not remove the gift from the economic cycle. Receiving something that has to be repaid is not a gift; it is a debt.⁹ For the same reason, he also refuses the possibility of a gift being received in an unconscious way, because he thinks that this still implies its being within an economic circle with its rules, despite the displacement of the keeping, the repression of the memory, etc. So, according to Derrida, in the unconscious gift there is not an absolute forgetting but only a partial one. In his view only the absolute forgetting could take the gift away from being within an economic cycle.

Two conclusions about the impossibility of a gift can be drawn from Derrida's analysis of the recipient: (1) the receiver's freedom may not admit any feelings of obligation or gratitude, and (2) no gift may participate in the logic of exchange that involves reciprocity for every act that, openly or secretly, participate in it (e.g., return, delay, repression).

B. The Donor

Derrida's third argument for denying the concept of the gift is related to the donor. He puts together the two preceding arguments against the very possibility of a gift: knowledge and economics undo the gift. In his opinion, just as with the receiver, there is also a paradox in regard to the donor. If the donor does not know himself as such, there is no gift, for nobody can give without knowing himself as a giver. On the other hand, knowing himself as a giver makes the donor introduce the gift into an economic cycle. In fact, in Derrida's view, knowing what one is doing implies, in different ways, the risk of a symbolic return of the gift to the donor, in this case to himself, e.g., by praising himself, approving of himself, gratifying himself, congratulating himself. If that happens, the gift is lost, because any reward that returns the gift to the donor simply destroys it as a gift.

⁷See Marcel Mauss, "Essay sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques," *Année Sociologique*, seconde série, 1 (1923–1924).

⁸Marcel Mauss, "Essay sur le don," p. 153: "la prestation totale n'emporte pas seulement l'obligation de rendre les cadeaux reçus; mais elle en suppose deux autres aussi importantes: obligation d'en faire, d'une part, obligation d'en recevoir, de l'autre."

⁹See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 40.

But, according to Derrida, in giving there is another danger for the giver that comes from the knowledge of the receiver. In fact, in Derrida's opinion the giver must know who the receiver is and how the receiver is receiving. The giver must know the character of the receiver in a psychological and moral sense. It would follow that if the donor fails to interpret the receiver properly, the receiver may feel that some violence or degradation has been done. For instance, when he receives something that for him is no gift at all, he can refuse the gift by interpreting it as an insult. On the other hand, in Derrida's view if the giver succeeds in guessing the character of the receiver, the latter can feel that his freedom is at stake. The giver has invaded his private space, like certain advertisements by Google that are programmed to correspond to our needs, wishes, and opinions. As Gary Sapiro writes, "Gift-giving risks undermining the masks, as Nietzsche calls them, that are necessary for our protection."¹⁰

C. *The Gift Itself*

Derrida's fourth argument concerns the gift itself. In this case, he suggests that we should add to the previous paradoxes of knowing what comes from the distinction between a real and an apparent gift. According to Derrida, in order to become a gift, what is being offered cannot be known as a real gift by the giver or the receiver. It cannot even appear as a gift, that is, as a value. The rationale for this claim is that when the gift is considered as something that has a value, it is necessarily introduced into an economic cycle. In a system of exchange, the fact that both the giver and the receiver look at the gift transform it into an object whose constant visibility makes it a substance or *res* that cannot in principle be gratuitous.

I think that Derrida here agrees with Heidegger's idea that any sort of value necessarily introduces the economic cycle.¹¹ In fact, accepting a gift as a gift means that we give it a value that apparently takes it away from other realities. But in doing so, Derrida thinks that the gift itself can be substituted for objects that also have value. It seems that, for Derrida, the gift, if it were to exist, would have to be unrepeatable and, therefore, cannot ever be substituted.

From the Derridean analysis of the gift, it can be said that there are three main problems that make the concept of a gift impossible:

(a) The freedom of the giver and of the receiver prohibit giving or receiving as a gift anything that involves force or necessity. If there were any sort of obligation, the gift would be undone, because there would not be any free giving or free receiving. Therefore, in Derrida's opinion a gift can be forced neither by any external cause, like the necessity of a debt to be repaid, nor by an internal one, like an inclination of gratitude, habit, or feeling. Derrida considers obligation something that is against

¹⁰Gary Sapiro, "The Metaphysics of Presents: Nietzsche's Gift, the Debt to Emerson, Heidegger's Values" in *The Logic of the Gift*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York NY: Routledge, 1997), p. 278.

¹¹Therefore Heidegger criticizes Nietzsche's transvaluation of values because he does not abandon the realm of ethics, that is, of economics. M. Heidegger writes in *Nietzsche, IV: Nihilism*, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (New York NY: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 59: "Although tacitly rejecting Nietzsche's philosophy, one rummaged through Nietzsche's writings, especially *Zarathustra*, for such values. Then, 'more scientifically' than the 'unscientific philosopher-poet' Nietzsche, one organized them into an 'ethics of value.'"

freedom. That is why, even before feeling anything, the simple recognition of the gift as such spoils it. But, on the other hand, in Derrida's view there is no gift without causation: a gift always has a giver who wants to give because he desires to be thanked, and a receiver who wants to receive what he needs or wishes.

According to Derrida, there is therefore a paradox: the gift interrupts the circularity of time: the gift cannot be present, cannot be anticipated, and cannot be remembered,¹² and yet a gift can only exist within the circularity of time. For that reason Derrida calls it a relation to time without relation, that is, something that is impossible. In other words, the gift must exit from time; it must take place in an instant, but time gives no such possibility. Any giving in time is aporetic: time gives no such opportunities.¹³

(b) The presence of the gift. According to Derrida, the giving of a gift also depends on presence as a condition of possibility. As a consequence, the gift can happen only in the present. That is, in recognizing it as a gift, a person who does the recognizing make it impossible for any gift to be unknown. On the other hand, Derrida thinks that the very recognition destroys the gift. In relation to the giver, a known gift is in a certain way an intentional gift, and therefore a gift with an intention. In relation to the receiver, a known gift is in a certain way the recognition of a duty—at least, that of thanking the giver. In relation to the gift, the presence of the gift or the gift as present shows its phenomenality as a gift. But according to Derrida its appearance as a gift transforms the apparition in a phantom and the action of giving it into a simulacrum. In his view, keeping its phenomenality is the same as taking away the gift. In short, if the gift presents itself, it no longer exists.

(c) Finally, Derrida thinks that necessity and presence belong to the cycle of the exchange. In his opinion it may be a real exchange, as when something is given to be returned, or a symbolic one, expressed in feelings of praise, gratitude and so on.

When analyzing Derrida's deconstruction of the gift one can see that in his thesis there is an intrinsic connection between the lack of freedom, the presence of the gift, and the economic cycle. Indeed, according to him, any presence of the gift always implies its recognition, and this fact always contains a necessary return that is against freedom.

2. MARION'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE GIFT

Before critically examining Derrida's deconstruction of the gift, it will be useful to see some of the critical remarks offered by Marion against the impossibility of the gift. According to Marion, Derrida considers the gift from the point of view of the principle of sufficient reason. That is why Derrida speaks of "identity and the

¹²Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 14: "The temporalization of time (memory, present, anticipation; retention, protention, imminence of the future; 'ecstasies', and so forth) always sets in motion the process of a destruction of the gift: through keeping, restitution, reproduction, the anticipatory expectation or apprehension that grasps or comprehends in advance."

¹³This idea of time that gives being comes from Heidegger. According to John Milbank, it is an Augustinian idea that has been secularized. John Milbank discusses the point in "Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic" in *Rethinking Metaphysics*, ed. L. Gregory Jones et al. (Oxford UK: Blackwell, 1995), p. 139.

fourfold causality which the economy follows in its metaphysical regime.”¹⁴ In fact, according to Marion, Derrida considers that the identity of the gift depends on the four classical causes: efficient (the giver), material and formal (the gift itself) and final (the intention of the giver).¹⁵ If one of them does not happen, the gift loses its identity and, as consequence, its possibility of being thought.

Marion denies that the principle of sufficient reason constitutes the necessary condition for the possibility of a gift for the following reasons. On the one hand, Marion thinks that the gift is not necessary at all, that is, it is not the effect of a cause. And, on the other hand, he thinks that the gift cannot be returned to the giver (in opposition to the principle of identity, a gift that returns or is identical to itself is annulled). According to Marion, the gift cannot be returned because, first of all, the gift exceeds the intentionality of the receiver's consciousness.¹⁶ As a confirmation of this thesis, Marion offers the example of a gift made to an anonymous receiver. This is the case when you give without knowing the identity of the recipient: when you give to a charitable organization, or when the gift has a universal destination (e.g., community, land, family, future generation). In Marion's view, in all of these examples the beneficiary remains invisible, without a face. There is no recognition of the gift either by the receiver or by the giver. According to Marion, one particular case of non-recognition is based on enmity. The receiver here is unable to return or even to accept the gift, because he is an enemy, that is, a person who returns evil for good. For that reason Marion calls an enemy the ally of the gift, while the friend is its opponent.

Marion not only affirms that the gift need not be returned, but also that the receiver can be phenomenologically suspended: the receiver can fail to be present at all, not even as an enemy. According to him, that happens when the gift is lost, abandoned by the giver, or not accepted by the recipient. An example of that is giving to an ungrateful receiver, who in addition to refusing to pay back the debt engendered by the gift, does not accept even the fact of that debt. Even in this situation the gift remains given since it meets the only condition that Marion accepts from Derrida. This condition is that of non-recognition, because a gift ought to overcome the limits of intentionality; otherwise, in Marion's opinion, it is no gift.¹⁷

It may seem that according to Marion only a gift not recognized or not accepted would be a real gift. Acceptance of the gift seems to be against the essence of the gift. But Marion denies this. He thinks that a gift that is accepted can be a real gift. Nevertheless, in this case a condition is necessary: the universalizing of the suspension of the receiver by his absence, like in the figures of anonymity, enmity, and ingratitude, or simply by his retirement, as in the eschatological receiver (the

¹⁴“Celui d'identité et la causalité quadriforme que suit, en son régime métaphysique, l'économie.” Jean-Luc Marion, “Esquisse d'un concept phénoménologique du don,” *Archivio di filosofia* 62 (1994): 77.

¹⁵Jean-Luc Marion, “Esquisse,” p. 77: “Le donateur donne le don comme une cause efficiente, utilise une cause formelle et une cause matérielle (ce qui est comme le don) suivant une cause finale (le bien du donataire et/ou la gloire du donateur); ces quatre causes permettent à la donation de satisfaire au principe de raison suffisante.”

¹⁶Ibid., p. 78: “la donation suppose donc l'époché du donataire.”

¹⁷Ibid.: “Le donataire ne sait pas et n'a pas à connaître quel don lui advient, précisément parce qu'un don peut et doit surpasser toute claire conscience.”

Supreme Judge or Christ who appears as the only receiver of good deeds), or in the universal receiver (fatherland, society, humanity). Here the gift, although it is accepted, is free from every singular receiver. In this way according to Marion it accomplishes its perfect figure, namely, that of a giving that does not make any distinction of persons, a giving that is completely indifferent to merit and demerit of the receiver, a giving in full ignorance of an eventual reciprocity.¹⁸

For Marion there are two functions of the receiver's suspension: first, that of allowing the receiver to support the excess of the gift in order to accept it; second, that of avoiding any dependence of the receiver on the giver. In Marion's view, if the receiver precedes the gift, he or she will act as a cause and therefore the gift will be undone. The receiver, however, could expect to receive it or could ask for it as an efficient cause, and in this way he or she has caused the gift by expecting, asking, supplicating, threatening and so on. That is why, according to Marion, expectation and reclamation are dispositions against the essence of the gift. In his opinion the receiver might also act as a final cause, when the gift is justly merited by good works or done by mercy in the face of misery. But Marion thinks that the receiver must not be seeking after the gift. Otherwise the gratitude on which the gift is based disappears. According to Marion, the simple presence of the receiver makes it possible to attribute it to a cause and inscribe him into the economic cycle (exchange, reciprocity, gratitude). In Marion's view, before a receiver who is humiliated or moved, the giver sees his gift disappearing. The giver receives recognition as a chief or benefactor. In both cases there is a return of the gift to the giver, a payment.

According to Marion, the mark of real giving is the abandonment of the gift by the giver. This abandonment in itself causes nothing. It only manifests the giver's spoliation (expropriation). In order to give something, the giver has to lose the gift completely. In Marion's opinion there are also some cases of a donation that is abandoned by the giver. The first one is the inheritance and the anonymous giver. In the heritage the giver had the intention to alienate his goods, that is, the intention that his goods would be possessed by his heir without returning to himself: "I can only achieve his—last—will by keeping for me as a gift what is not mine but has come to me."¹⁹ Also in the case of the anonymous giver, the giving is perfect because he or she disappears completely. For the receiver, there remains only to accept it. The second figure is the unconscious giver. Anonymity and death reproduce a more original obscurity, i.e., unconsciousness. The perfect giver has to give without being aware of himself as a giver. That also means, according to Marion, that the giver is never conscious of the effect that he produces on possible recipients.²⁰ He does not know the effect of his giving, for instance, the joy in the receiver (sportive, aesthetic, erotic). Marion thinks that if the giver had any consciousness of his giving, there would be no gift, for there would be a return to himself in the form of a reflection of him as a giver. The third figure is related to the receiver. As there is no giver, the gift transforms the receiver into an indebted man, who can never pay his debt.

¹⁸See Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné* (Paris, France: PUF, 1997), p. 135.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 137: "Je ne peux accéder à sa—dernière—volonté qu'en gardant pour moi comme un don ce qui n'est pas mien, mais me revient."

²⁰Ibid., pp. 128–35.

In Marion's opinion, by recognizing his debt the recipient becomes conscious of himself as a receiver. According to Marion, the giver's wish of losing nothing can be referred to the *ego*, the transcendental and constitutive I, who wants nothing to exceed his intuition, that is, the intentionality that constitutes the object; this ego—the *inconcussum quid* of Descartes—is incapable of this kind of donation. Marion thinks that the awareness of the act of giving is the origin of a contrary movement to expropriation, that of appropriation of the gift or the identification of the gift as a gift and the giver as a giver. That is why Marion concludes that in order to speak of a gift, the giver can and must be suspended.²¹

Of course, Marion does not refuse absolutely the consciousness of the giver, but only the consciousness of the *ego*, which is conscious of itself giving instead of being conscious of the donation.²² In Marion's view, in this losing the gift by giving there is a new paradox: losing becomes a winning, because by losing something you win yourself, insofar as the object of the gift is worth less than yourself.

Marion thinks that there is no cause of the gift, and therefore there is no causal structure of the gift (giver, receiver and the gift). Every element can be suspended because it is not necessary in order to think of the gift. In Marion's opinion there is no giver or recipient who is conscious of himself/herself as such, but above all there is no gift that is an object. The object is only the symbol of the gift: a crown (the gift of power), a ring (the gift of myself). Or there is no object at all, for instance, the gift of my word. For that reason, according to Marion, not only the giver and the receiver can be suspended as consciousnesses, but also the gift as an object can be suspended: the gift gives nothing, that is, neither an object nor a reality. As he writes,

thus the gift never coincides with the object of the gift. Better, one could suggest as a basic rule that the more a gift shows itself to be precious, the less it is achieved in an object, or, what is equivalent to it, the more the object reduces itself to an abstract role of support, of occasion, of symbol. Conversely, the gifts that give most never give anything—not a thing, not an object; not because they disappoint the expectation, but because what they give belongs neither to reality nor to objectivity.²³

According to Marion, in order to reduce the gift from the object to the givenness or donation, it is necessary that the giver or the receiver act as a transcendental consciousness; otherwise there is no reduction at all. As Marion states, “the reduc-

²¹See Jean-Luc Marion, “Esquisse,” pp. 75–94.

²²Marion criticizes Derrida because for Derrida the intentional meaning of the donation is a good motive to refuse it. Jean-Luc Marion writes in *Étant donné*, p. 112 n1: “On peut pourtant discuter que la conscience de donner induit *toujours* le narcissisme du donateur: ce tour ne se vérifie que si la conscience de donner reste d'abord la conscience que c'est moi qui donne, conscience de soi donnant, plus que conscience de donner; mais ce transfert du centre de gravité de la donation à soi prétend-il jamais accéder à une authentique conscience de don? L'argument de Derrida presuppose ainsi ce qu'il agit de démontrer: que la conscience de don annule *comme telle* le don.”

²³Jean-Luc Marion, “Esquisse,” p. 85: “Ainsi, le don ne coïncide pas avec l'objet du don. Mieux, on peut suggérer comme une règle de fond que, plus un don se montre précieux, moins il s'accomplit comme un objet, ou, ce qui y revient, plus l'objet se réduit au rôle abstrait de support, d'occasion, de symbole. Réciproquement, les dons qui donnent le plus ne donnent jamais *rien*—aucune chose, aucun objet; non qu'ils déçoivent l'attente, mais parce qu'ils donnent n'appartient ni à la réalité, ni à l'objectité.”

tion will demand the right that one of the two (alternatively and without definitive privilege) remains in the situation of the transcendental I.”²⁴

But if the gift is neither an object nor a reality, what is it properly? Marion’s solution is to think, along with Levinas, of a gift that exempts itself from being and therefore from presence and from subsistence. In Marion’s opinion, besides thinking the gift either as an object, a being, or as a pure condition, there is another possibility, that of the gift as pure givenness or donation. According to him, a gift is thought as pure giving, for instance, when you give as if the gift can be neither returned nor possessed. A gift, whose essence cannot be grasped in presence, is for Marion neither an object nor nothingness, but it continues to be a present and therefore a phenomenon, a saturated phenomenon that exceeds intuition.

Therefore Marion finds baffling Derrida’s paradox of the gift as a phenomenon that cannot appear:

Either the gift presents itself in presence, and disappears from givenness, to become inscribed in a metaphysical system of exchange; or the gift does not present itself, but thus no longer becomes visible at all, thus closing all phenomenality of givenness.²⁵

Marion does not agree with Derrida’s distinction between a gift that is something determinate (which Marion identifies as the annulled gift), and a gift that gives the condition of the given in general but that concretely gives nothing, as in the expressions: time giving, life giving, and death giving. As Horner explains:

Marion rejects this option, too, because he sees in it a hint of metaphysical thought (he reads “condition” as “foundation”). He also rejects it because he maintains that the modification of the object of the gift from given to condition of the given allows neither for the passage from the gift to givenness nor for the freeing of givenness from the economic system.²⁶

Instead, in Marion’s view, the gift becomes a gift not when it is given, but when the giver considers it able to be given (“givable”), that is, able to please someone. But, for Marion, being givable is not a real predicate of the gift-object. So, the gift-object undergoes no change in itself as a result of its becoming givable; the transformation occurs totally within the giver, who becomes a giver. According to Marion, something like that happens in relation to the receiver: the 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 (“acceptable”). In Marion’s opinion the gift can be judged unacceptable for different motives: contempt (“too little”), mistrust (*et dona ferentes*), malice (“that would make him/her too much pleasure”). Therefore, Marion thinks

²⁴Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné*, p. 123: “Bref, même si de fait le donateur et le donataire pouvaient se réduire simultanément, la réduction demanderait de droit que l’un des deux (alternativement et sans privilège définitif) demeure en situation de Je transcendantal. Par conséquent, l’objet donné pourra éventuellement se trouver réduit par rapport aux deux “consciences” (donataire, donateur), mais aucune d’entre elles ne pourra se réduire sans que l’autre ne lui assure la fonction de Je transcendantal.”

²⁵Jean-Luc Marion, “Esquisse,” pp. 79–80; see also *Étant donné*, pp. 113–15.

²⁶Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as a Gift: Marion, Derrida and the Limits of Phenomenology* (Bronx NY: Fordham Univ. Press, 2001), p. 128.

that in order to accept the gift, the humility and trust of the receiver are necessary. The receiver has to be humble because the gift is undeserved and has to trust in its giving. But, in Marion's view, the acceptability of the gift, like its givability, is not a real predicate: neither of the object nor of the receiver. For that reason he concludes that the reduction of the gift to pure giving consists in being givable and acceptable. According to Marion, the power of givenness (donation) makes the gift decide itself as a gift through the double consent of the giver and the receiver, who are less agents of the gift than acted by the gift. For Marion, the gift shows itself in such a way that it conquers (or imposes) its givability to a giver and its acceptability to a receiver. In conclusion, the gift gives itself by giving to be given and received.

Through the phenomenological reduction of the gift to givenness Marion tries to escape Derrida's aporetic treatment of a gift that swallows donation and phenomenality. Marion proposes a gift that, instead of disappearing when it is completely done, is able to show its phenomenality as a pure givenness. In Marion's view, recognizing the gift implies a strict and particular phenomenological view, that of looking at facts (the presence or absence of object and reality) as a donation. In short, Marion opposes Derrida's economic interpretation of the gift (the gift according to economics) with his phenomenological vision of the gift (the gift according to donation).

3. PROBLEMS WITH THE THESES OF DERRIDA AND MARION

Perhaps the starting point of Derrida and Marion about the gift is the Heideggerian reflection on the German expression *es gibt* and its double meaning. Derrida and Marion both agree that the term gift in phenomenology, above all in Heidegger, has two meanings, and also that the first one means "present" (*Gabe*), but they disagree in regard to the second meaning. For Derrida the second meaning of gift is "event" (*Ereignis*), while for Marion it is "donation" (*Gegebenheit*).

The two authors thus have a different understanding of gift. In fact, for Derrida this double meaning is the manifestation of the aporetic character of the gift. According to the first meaning the gift is something free, but according to the second meaning it is something necessary. Derrida also finds aporetic the character of the gift in the Heideggerian vision of the "hand" that gives (*geben-Gabe*) and by giving hides itself. In Derrida's interpretation, man's hand gives something and gives itself as that which gives the opportunity to think and yet that which we have not yet thought, that is, as a sign of speaking and thinking (*Zeichen*).²⁷ The hand shows itself and hides itself (*Entbergung/Verbergung*), like the truth. According to Derrida, in the gift there is also a structural opposition by showing and hiding. As an event the gift must be known, but as present the gift must be hidden. So, in Derrida's view, the condition of possibility of a gift is also the condition of its impossibility. That does not mean that for Derrida there is no gift, but only that the gift cannot be known (cannot be intuited nor experienced). It can be only thought as the impossible, that

²⁷Jacques Derrida, "La main de Heidegger (Geschlecht II)" in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, 415–51.

is, it can be thought as the conditions of its possibility, which are at the same time the conditions of its impossibility.

Instead, in Marion's opinion, between "present" (*Gabe*) and "donation" (*Gegebenheit*) there is no opposition, but there is a necessary implication. Moreover, Marion thinks that in the gift one can find the key to phenomenology. According to him, donation is the last phenomenological reduction, and one that neither Husserl nor Heidegger has ever put into practice. The gift is a phenomenon of pure donation or givenness. The apparently aporetic character of the gift shows, for Marion, its purity, its reduction to givenness.

3.1. *The Phenomenological Problem of the Gift*

In his deconstruction of the gift Derrida takes for granted the Kantian distinction between knowing and thinking. According to Kant, although the *noumenon* cannot be known since it cannot appear in the consciousness, it can be thought. But for Derrida the gift is not a pure Kantian *noumenon*. In fact, Kant understands the *noumenon*, like God or the soul, as a condition of possibility of both pure and practical reason, while Derrida considers the gift as a condition of possibility that implies at the same time its impossibility.²⁸ According to him, the deconstruction of the gift shows the impossibility of thinking the *noumenon*, except as something impossible. The gift belongs to the order of *noumena*, not to the *phenomena*. In Derrida's view, phenomenology fails because the *noumenon* cannot be experienced.

Derrida considers that the gift is an event that cannot be in the realm of consciousness, even though it will somehow bear a relationship to consciousness that is, and thus be constitutive of it. As Horner explains summarizing Derrida's view,

the Gift cannot take place between subjects. It will always have already been, that is, it will be immemorial; and it will be known only by the erased trace of its having passed. In other words, the Gift can only be known by way of a trace: it can have no decidable origin, cannot exist as such, and can have no decidable destination.²⁹

However, according to Derrida, the gift can be thought as the condition of possibility of thinking something that is impossible. In Derrida's view we have here a new paradox: the excess of the gift overcomes language and at the same time needs language to indicate the conditions of its possibility.

Marion agrees with Derrida that the gift cannot be known because it is neither an object nor a being, but he disagrees with him by stating that the gift can be described. He considers that the gift is a phenomenon, though a very peculiar one, because it is beyond any horizon of intentionality. Nevertheless, according to Marion, the gift can be described as a *saturated* phenomenon, that is, one in which what is given to intuition exceeds the intentionality of consciousness. For Marion the gift is neither a *noumenon* (or substance) nor an object of consciousness. It is true that there are gift-objects, like a jewel or a tie, but the gift-object simply serves as support to the

²⁸Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps: 1. La fausse monnaie* (Paris, France: Galilée, 1999), p. 24: "Les conditions de possibilité du don . . . désignent simultanément les conditions de l'impossibilité du don."

²⁹Robyn Horner, *Rethinking*, p. 195.

“real” gift that is not an object; the gift-object is a symbol of that gift, always inadequate to the fullness of what the “real” gift signifies (the gift-object works as an icon that does not avoid seeing beyond). In Marion’s view, the gift is the presence of otherness, of the infinite. For that reason, according to him, the gift can be studied neither with a metaphysical method nor with a traditional phenomenological one. It needs a new comprehension of the phenomenological method that is based on givenness (*Gegebenheit*). In other words, Marion believes that a phenomenological experience beyond an intentional horizon is possible. This experience is donation or givenness.

Derrida does not accept this thesis. According to him—and also to Lévinas—there is no phenomenology without a horizon in which something appears. That is why he refuses the givenness of the gift. It cannot ever appear. When it appears, it is destroyed.³⁰ That is why Derrida argues that Marion reduces the givenness to the gift and this reduction, according to him, is not phenomenological. In Derrida’s opinion, it is impossible to have a phenomenological givenness that overcomes the intentionality of consciousness. Therefore, for Derrida, the gift that is beyond intentionality cannot be either experienced or described.³¹ It is impossible to describe the gift because any description of it must take into account the giver, the gift, and the receiver. It is impossible also to put into brackets any single element. According to Derrida, to put them into brackets is the same as to deconstruct the gift, that is, to maintain that the condition of possibility of the gift is the absence of a donor and a receiver, or at least the absence of their constitution as such by giving. Therefore, in Derrida’s view, the gift can only be thought of as something that is impossible.

Marion criticizes this argument by saying that Derrida has an economic idea of the gift as if it were *caused* by the principle of sufficient reason that governs economic laws. For Marion, instead of being caused, the non-economic gift is a donation: the more it is a donation, the more unexpected, unforeseeable, and unrepeatable it is. In this case the gift has no cause at all; it only has givenness, that is, it gives itself.

However, it seems that Derrida’s criticism hits the mark. How can Marion call himself a phenomenologist if givenness is beyond consciousness? I think Marion is neither a metaphysician nor a phenomenologist, but a kind of apophatic thinker. In fact, Marion not only refuses the entity of the gift, but also its apparition as an object of consciousness. Why does Marion reject the reality of the gift? Because he understands it in a Kantian and also in a Husserlean way, that is, as an existence outside the essence. The gift becomes a gift not when it is given, that is, when it is real, but when the donor considers it able to be given (“givable”). But being givable is not a real predicate of the gift-object; so the gift-object undergoes no change in itself as a result of its becoming givable. The transformation occurs totally within the donor, who in turn by accepting the givability of the gift becomes himself a donor. The condition of possibility of becoming a donor depends on the

³⁰Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps*, especially “Le temps du Roy.”

³¹See Robyn Horner, *Rethinking*.

sense of obligation, that is, when the donor realizes that he or she owes something to someone:

The gift begins and, in fact, is completed, as soon as the donor envisages owing something to someone, thus when the donor admits that he should be a debtor, thus a recipient. The gift begins when the potential donor suspects that another gift has already preceded it, for which he owes something, to which he must respond. Not only does the gift reside in the decision to give taken by the potential donor, but the donor can only thus decide insofar as he recognizes that another gift has already obliged them. The gift is decided.³²

The gift thus arises as a result of both the recognition of givability and the recognition of indebtedness always related to an anterior gift, which prompts a new gift. But neither the donor nor the receiver is an agent of the gift so much as acted upon by givenness. So, the gift is outside any economy, outside any causality, and outside any agency. Nevertheless Marion's account of the gift retains the notion of indebtedness (which according to Derrida is an exemplary figure of the economic circle). Indeed, Marion goes so far as to suggest that the self is preceded by and defined by this indebtedness.³³ Marion concludes by pointing out the key role of decision in both the gift and in donation:

According to the regime of reduction, the lived experience of consciousness where the gift gives itself consists in the decision of the gift—that of receiving the gift by the recipient, but especially that of persuading the recipient to the gift by the gift itself. The gift gives *itself* in giving to be received.³⁴

Therefore, the conditions of possibility of the gift are three: to be given intrinsically, irrevocably, and radically. This gift is the call that comes from outside. The call constitutes the subject as a giver or receiver. The recognition of this call comes only from an act of will: the acceptance of the call.

It is easy to find in this description of the gift many of Heidegger's ideas: the call, decision, obligation, etc. But instead of the call of Being, as in Heidegger, Marion speaks of a non-metaphysical call, that of givenness that gives itself, and by giving decides of itself and obliges the giver and receiver to become as such. Although this donation of the gift has neither entity nor objectivity, it seems to have a name, God. Of course, he can be known only in the giving of the gift and not as a giver who gives a gift. The second interpretation of God corresponds to metaphysics, in which God is the cause and the gift his effect. God cannot be known as a transcendental giver, because the only transcendence that Marion admits is the consciousness or I. As receivers of the gift, we can know its acceptability, for instance, of creation or grace, but not its givability.

³²Jean-Luc Marion, "Esquisse," p. 133.

³³See Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné*, p. 98.

³⁴Jean-Luc Marion, "Esquisse," p. 85: "En regime de réduction, le vécu de conscience où se donne le don consiste dans la décision du don—celle de recevoir le don par le donataire, mais surtout celle de décider le donataire au don par le don lui-même. Le donne *se* donne en donnant de le recevoir."

Marion realizes that his underlining the giving instead of the giver can be interpreted as the impossibility of deciding whether the giver is God or fortune. He refuses such indecisibility because “the character of the gift comes from the convenience of what has surged, or more exactly from the confession that I make of this convenience, from recognizing the gift as a giving to me without me.”³⁵ So, the recognition of the receiver constitutes the gift as such, insofar as for the existence of a gift it is enough that the gift shows itself by giving itself to a receiver. The problem still remains: how can the receiver be sure it is a gift and not something necessary or even worse something poisonous. For this question there is no answer. Givenness is beyond any doubt. But that is not philosophy; that is faith.

3.2. *The Anthropological Problem of Freedom*

Another problem in Derrida's and Marion's concept of the gift is related to the way in which they understand freedom. Both authors agree with Kant in the opposition between nature and freedom. For that reason they consider that the gift, which should be a pure manifestation of freedom, cannot be caused either by a non-human cause or by any human motivation. In other words, the gift cannot be produced naturally or intentionally; otherwise it would enter into the economic circle.

Perhaps it is Derrida who better explains why any cause is incompatible with the gift as such. According to him, if the gift comes from a natural cause, it is not a gift at all; it is only the effect that depends completely on a necessary relation. The gift, if it exists, cannot be necessary but must be gratuitous. Gratuity is also the reason why the gift must be given without intention. In fact, according to Derrida, the gift cannot be out of generosity, because generosity is either a natural power or an essential character, and in both cases the gift becomes undermined by necessity or by a kind of rational plan. His explanation is as follows:

Would a gift that proceeds from a natural power, from an originary aptitude for giving, be a gift? Simultaneously, we come around to dissociating the gift from generosity in a paradox the full rigor of which must be assumed. If it is not to follow a program, even a program inscribed in the *phusis*, a gift must not be generous. Generosity must not be its motive or its essential character. One may give *with* generosity, but not *out of* generosity, not so as to obey this originary or natural drive called generosity, the need or desire to give, regardless of the translations or symptoms one may decipher in it.³⁶

It is interesting to underline that Derrida's idea of nature as something opposed to freedom prevents him from understanding virtue, especially generosity. If generosity is an urge of one's character to do something, it cannot be the origin of the gift because it is something that tends to act in a necessary way. It seems that Derrida does not take into account the possibility of virtue as an inclination that depends completely on the use of personal freedom, that is, virtue as a second nature or as

³⁵Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné*, p. 144: “Le caractère de don vient donc de la convenance de ce qui surgit, ou plus exactement de l'aveu que je fais de leur convenance, de leur reconnaissance comme donnés à moi sans moi.”

³⁶Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 162.

nature that has been personalized. Moreover, generosity is not a feature of some individual character, but rather a social disposition or *habitus* that comes from the relational dimension of human persons and the process of their humanization.³⁷

Finally, for Derrida, the gift cannot be originated by intention. Every intention has a goal. But the gift, if it exists, has no goal, no end; otherwise, the gift will be introduced in a chain of means and ends that transforms it into an object of the market. So, the gift is gratuitous in a complete sense: it has no necessary origin and no necessary end. That is why there is no obligation to give it or to receive it.

As this kind of perfect gratuitousness is impossible to achieve in time, Derrida concludes by saying that the order of the gift is a moment of madness; it is never to be realized, but only ever desired. This moment of madness or excess is to be found only in love, in hospitality and in the text,³⁸ when the borders between the I and the Other of the economic cycle are totally broken, that is, when the lover and the author gives without wishing any return or when the owner gives his own ownership to the guest expropriating himself. The excess inscribed in the gift comes from its impossibility of being determinate. For instance, the gift of the text does not imply any border, because difference and dissemination (different contexts, readers, etc.) are always at work in it.

But if the gift has this indeterminacy, the only gift that can be given is no gift at all, because it is the gift in which no one intends to give anything to anyone and no one is intentionally conscious of receiving anything. Given without intention to no one whom it can oblige, it must be the gift of nothing.³⁹

In Derrida's conception of this pure gratuitousness that gives nothing can be found a radical opposition between three different pairs of concepts: nature and freedom, economics and gift, obligation and gratuitousness. At the very core of these three oppositions there is a more essential one, that of *eros* and *agape*. In fact *eros* or desire is a natural urge towards something wanted, which is in the basis of economics and the social distinction between rights and duties.⁴⁰ Nature, economics, and society seem to depend on *eros*. Instead, for Derrida the gift does not depend on desire or a situation of wanting, but on a situation of excess or *agape*. Understood as pure excess, *agape* is neither desire nor a right nor a duty, but a gratuitous act or, from the point of view of social and legal relations, a moment of madness.

³⁷See Pierre Bourdieu, "Marginalia—Some Additional Notes on the Gift" in *The Logic of Practice: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, trans. Richard Nice (London UK: Routledge, 1997), p. 233. For Bourdieu, one must not forget that both giver and receiver are prepared to be generous by the whole labor of socialization, which allows them to enter into generous exchange without intention or calculation of profit, to know and recognize the gift for what it is, in its twofold truth: an act of generosity and a social-deception (an open secret—conservation and increase of symbolic capital—that cannot become public knowledge; to act as if one did not know the rule of the game: the logic of exchange.

³⁸Robyn Horner, *Rethinking*, p. 192: "there 'is' gift in the excess that is not intended by the author but which is structurally a part of the text. Similarly, since the destination of the gift cannot be ultimately specified, it cannot be a gift given to someone in particular. The gift will go where it will. There can be no calculated return, hence the identification of the author does not necessarily destroy the gift of the text."

³⁹David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids MI: Willian B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 261: "The gift is no gift: the *present* that is not (a) present."

⁴⁰See John Milbank, *Can a Gift be Given*, p. 122.

I think that such opposition between *eros* and *agape* is wrong because human persons have a nature that is corporeal and rational, or even better, relational. As corporeal relational beings, we are needy and at the same time able to give. We can give because we have first received from others. Without the giving of others (nourishment, physical and spiritual care, love) we cannot develop ourselves as humans: we cannot walk, speak, love). Later on, without giving we cannot flourish as personalities: as friend, husband/wife, father/mother. Although receiving physical and spiritual care and giving love have in many cases a different referent (a receiver and a giver), they are equally necessary for us—not only because for each of us to be loved and to love are equally necessary, but above all because the virtues that others put into practice to love us are the same as those that we need to acquire in order to love others. So, both receiving and giving are needed in a double way: naturally and ethically. In other words, the mutual exchanges of giving and receiving are necessary not only in an economic and social way, but in every personal relation, especially in human love, where *eros* and *agape* are two faces of the same love: “human erotic attachments are only sustained by the incessant exchange of gifts, which are always tokens of further, future gifts, such that desire is never fulfilled as a possession, for a constitutive lack in desire will always prove its own thwarting. If desire does know moments of fulfilment, then this is in the coincidence of giving and giving back.”⁴¹

3.3. Understanding Freedom As Difference without Relation

Another aspect of Derrida's concept of freedom is its denial of any relationality. This is especially clear in the gift. According to this author, in the gift there is a double risk: a transcendental illusion, and the hypocrisy of taking under the guise of giving. In Derrida's view, this double risk shows itself in the searching for reciprocity by giving, because reciprocity always undoes the gift.

Derrida is right: in order to give one cannot have the intention of receiving something back, otherwise giving is transformed into a kind of taking. Nevertheless, a reciprocity is possible that is not intended as a simple taking. Perhaps Derrida's conception of reciprocity as a pure taking comes from a misinterpretation of Mauss's claim in *The Gift* that reciprocity is the key to the gift. The kind of reciprocity of which Mauss speaks is not related to giving-taking goods alone. Of course, Mauss affirms a circularity in giving-taking-giving. But for him the exchange of goods is not the essence of the gift; this exchange manifests something different, the trust in others that is necessary to avoid war and to live in peace.⁴² So, the reciprocal exchange appears as an expression of reconciliation and the giving-taking-giving as the gift of peace. Surely Mauss's concept of reciprocity does not contemplate the giving between friends, lovers and so on, but rather a good system for protecting peace in society. However it is not a simple exchange of goods between a giver and a receiver.

Therefore, it seems that Derrida understands reciprocity not in the way of Maussian way but in that of Lévi-Strauss, that is, reciprocity as a kind of communication. In

⁴¹Ibid., p. 124.

⁴²See Marshall Sahlins, “The Spirit of the Gift,” in Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift*, p. 89.

fact, for Lévi-Strauss, reciprocity constitutes the structure of society, formed with things, subjects, and the passing from one to another. For Lévi-Strauss, the exchange of goods or reciprocity enables the subjects to surmount a contradiction born with their differences: that is, the contradiction of perceiving things as elements of dialogue, in respect of self and others simultaneously, and destined by nature to pass from the one to the other. The fact that those things may belong to *the one* or *the other* represents a situation that is derivative from the initial relational aspect.⁴³ It is clear now why Derrida reacts against reciprocity understood in a Lévi-Straussian way. This kind of primitive social relation destroys difference, or at least reduces it to a pure play of mirrors of the only reality that exists, relation. Instead, for Derrida, difference is only a trace that we can find in time.

The refusal of reciprocity can be also found in Levinas, who proposes as the basis of every ethical issue a relation without relation; otherwise friendship, love, and so on falls into selfishness. Before the other, who shows himself/herself through his/her face, only self-sacrifice, self-denial is the right ethical aptitude.⁴⁴ The self must give without receiving anything.

Marion has also a negative idea of reciprocity because it contains a counter-gift, that is, a false gift. For that he goes further by affirming that the enemy is the ally of gift and the friend its opponent. It is necessary to reduce the giver to the givability of the givenness and his intention to the gift to an enemy, that is, to someone who never will give it back.⁴⁵ Although Marion agrees with Derrida in his criticism of reciprocity, his starting-point is not *difference*, but paradoxically the *I*. In fact, Marion tries to understand the gift from an *I* who changes his/her point of view as giver or receiver remaining always transcendental. Marion maintains the transcendental *I* as the core of the Husserlian phenomenology. It is true that he does not accept the Husserlian constitution of the phenomenon because the givenness is not produced but received by consciousness. Nevertheless, according to Marion, the givenness is not a relation between two subjects but a relation between the gift and the transcendental *I*: the gift gives itself to the giver as givable and gives itself to the receiver as acceptable. In Marion's view, givenness alone has the active freedom of giving without receiving, that is, a decision of giving itself to an *I*. Instead, the giver or the receiver has a passive freedom, that of accepting the givability or acceptability of the gift. In opposition to Derrida, Marion accepts the gift because he distinguishes

⁴³Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (London UK: Routledge, 1987), chap. 3.

⁴⁴John Milbank, *Can a Gift be Given*, p. 124: "As against a logic which would associate a purity of love with unilateral action, it seems not insignificant that within romantic love an asymmetry of giving, where only one partner gives presents and favors, suggests not at all freedom and gratuitousness, but rather an obsessive admiration that subsists only at a wilfully melancholic distance, or still worse a purchase of sexual satisfaction and in either case the slide of desire towards one-sided private possession. Giving here is most free where it is *yet* most bound, most mutual and most reciprocally demanded. The logic of divine *agape* plays above such play, yet this height must not be conceived in a fashion that renders it in fact more base, more mean and solipsistic, in the name of apparent 'self-sacrifice'."

⁴⁵Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné*, p. 129: "L'ennemi devient ainsi l'allié du don et l'ami, l'adversaire du don. L'ennemi, qui figure le donataire en régime de réduction, le donataire dénégateur, reçoit seul la donation, sans aucun commerce. Ce paradoxe psychologique répond à une nécessité phénoménologique: la réduction du don demande de metre entre parentheses le donataire et en réduit la transcendance au vécu d'un ennemi pour ma conscience."

between two kinds of freedom: an active freedom that is beyond any consciousness, duty, or obligation, that of the givenness of the gift, and a passive freedom that depends on duty or obligation not in relation to another subject but in relation to the givenness of the gift. Nevertheless, Derrida and Marion have both a negative concept of freedom: freedom as the absence of any natural or human constriction. For both, the gift cannot be either the origin of relations or depend on relations, for relation is interpreted as constriction, as obligation. The only origin of the gift is an excess of giving (Derrida) or a decision to give or to receive (Marion).

In Marion's view, givability and acceptability are not the manifestation of a relationship between different subjects. Rather, they are a rational duty: givability or acceptability that does not take into account the other and his/her good, but only the answer to the givenness. The decision of the gift puts into brackets the intention of the subjects and their relation because they are both considered against real goodness. First Lévinas and then Marion develop a particular form of the *aporia* between goodness and intention: goodness has to hide itself from itself, otherwise it is transformed into selfishness. While for Lévinas goodness hides itself by looking at the face of the other without desire,⁴⁶ for Marion givenness hides itself from itself by giving, that is, by showing itself as givable or acceptable.⁴⁷

4. CONCLUSION

Derrida and Marion are in agreement on denying reciprocity to be an essential element of the logic of gift. For them reciprocity is always connected with economy. But they conceive economics differently, and as consequence the nature of a gift. For Derrida, economics means credit and debit, while for Marion it means causality.⁴⁸ This different understanding of economics is the reason why, on the one hand, Derrida thinks of the gift either as impossible or as a moment of madness that overcomes credit and debit; on the other hand, Marion refuses a gift that is caused, that is, a gift that does not come from a simple decision to give. As a result, the gift has in both authors no need, no motivation, no cause, and in Derrida also no obligation.

In my opinion, excess and decision cannot be the essence of the gift. On the one hand, excess makes reciprocity impossible, but it is on this that a gift has to be based. Certainly, this reciprocity is not an economic giving-receiving, but rather a personal relation, or at least the possibility for this kind of relation. On the other hand, the gift does not come from a pure decision of its givenness; otherwise there is no love and without that there is also no gift.

Intention is also denied by both of these authors because it seems to them that every human intention is wrong insofar as it is rooted in selfishness. Derrida and Marion do not distinguish between the impurity of our intention and the possibility

⁴⁶On the other hand, this conception of the gift is a sentimental one. Marilyn Strathern discusses this point in "Partners and Consumers: Making Relations Visible" in Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift*, p. 302.

⁴⁷See Robert Bernasconi, "What Goes Around Comes Around: Derrida and Levinas on the Economy of the Gift and the Gift of Genealogy" in Nice, *The Logic of Practice*, p. 268.

⁴⁸See "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion" in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. John Caputo (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1999), p. 77.

to rectify it.⁴⁹ Moreover, they do not think that, besides selfishness, there are other possible intentions like the good for others and also their love. That is why God, who does not need anything, wants to be loved, and in so doing gives human beings the possibility to love Him. This is not selfishness but the essence of the gift: the gift creates essentially the condition of possibility of itself, that is, of giving-receiving. The gift does not necessarily cause giving; it opens up its possibility. Therefore, the reality of giving is not only its presence but also its possibilities. This is the difference between being and giving: being is and giving gives. The being of human persons is only in themselves, even when this is a being-for-others. Giving in human beings, in its superior form, not only is or gives something but also gives others the capacity for giving. For that reason giving always implies the possibility of receiving.⁵⁰

Neither reciprocity nor intention destroys the gift, but rather constitutes it.⁵¹ That can be observed in friendship, as Aristotle explains. According to him, intention and reciprocity are essential aspects in every friendship relation, and above all in a virtuous friendship. Without reciprocity there is no friendship, but rather beneficence: the receiver cannot be treated as a friend; he is loved by the giver as his own work, like a poem by the poet. It does not mean that giver and receiver have to be completely equal in giving. In the Aristotelian friendship based on virtue, the virtuous person tries to give more than he receives because friendship is a *praxis* or *vital action* in which the right middle point depends on prudence and not on quantity. This desire of giving always more comes from love. Only when giving is reduced to *poiesis* or production the gift is no longer understood as a kind of *praxis*, but as an exchange of goods.

Although reciprocity always exists in human gifts, it is not symmetrical but asymmetrical, one that is based on a transcendental relation between I and You that overcomes consciousness. At the beginning of our life each of us is recognized without being able to recognize others. For that reason this transcendental relation is at the same time a gift and a duty: I must recognize others because I was first recognized by others. Recognition and therefore reciprocity are necessary for speaking of gift. That means that the gift admits delay and a non-identical repetition between giver and receiver.

⁴⁹In this sense this argument resembles Nietzsche. See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Reginald J. Hollingdale (New York NY: Penguin, 1961), III, 10, 516. According to Nietzsche, giving also implies violence and danger. Giving forces someone to receive something, like the artist in whose giving there is also a violent imposition.

⁵⁰See John Milbank, *Can a Gift be Given*, p. 125.

⁵¹The idea that a gift does not imply any relationship may be based on the individualism of our culture. See Marilyn Strathern, "Partners and Consumers: Making Relations Visible" in Shrift, *The Logic of the Gift*, 302.