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The Possibility of the Gift

Bruno Cassara`

Abstract

Like many others who work in continental philosophy, Jean-Luc Marion has written on the gift and its possibility. His essay attempts to refute Jacques Derrida's conclusion that the gift as such is impossible, as its structure is in fact always one of exchange within an economic horizon. Marion first presents the gift as it appears within the horizon of economy and identifies the reasons for the impossibility of the gift. He therefore reasons that the gift must be examined under another, more primordial horizon—givenness, where the gift becomes possible as non-self-identical and unconditioned possibility. This paper provides an alternative solution that allows for the gift in a more ordinary sense to occur as gift according exclusively to the condition of possibility of the gratuitousness of the giver.

As a number of other figures in continental philosophy, Jean-Luc Marion has busied himself with reflections on the gift. Following Jacques Derrida's account of this concept, which has by now become its most famous treatment, Marion's essay "The Reason of the Gift" begins by claiming that a gift can never be given nor received as such, as in the end it is always absorbed in a cycle of giving-taking and set against the horizon of economy. In this brief paper I would like to revisit Marion's treatment of the gift in its Derridian horizon (i.e., that of economy), and to claim that the apparent impossibility of the gift does not result from a true phenomenological impossibility, but rather from a prior misunderstanding and mis-definition of it.

It is enough for Marion to examine gift giving phenomenologically according to its three components (the giver, the

recipient, and the gift) in order to make evident the impossibility of the gift as such. First, the giver never gives without receiving as much as he gave in return; he always obtains remuneration, in one form or another, for his giving. Thus the giver can be paid back in full or receive a gift in return. But even without material recompense she has her reward nonetheless: she is thanked, lauded, and recipient and witness alike recognize her magnanimity. Even the admittedly natural feeling of self-satisfaction abolishes the gift: the giver "[disappears] as giver to become the purchaser of [her] own esteem,"⁴⁵ thus forfeiting any claim to gratuitousness. In a similar fashion, the recipient of the gift cannot receive without establishing, or at the very least acknowledging, his dependence on the giver. The recipient may attempt to elude this dependence by recasting the gift received into a loan, thus proclaiming himself debtor rather than recipient, or he may decide to spurn the gift or lie about it, claiming that he never received anything or that he was owed the gift to begin with.⁴⁶

Beyond the intentions and reactions of giver and recipient, a deeper impossibility lies at the heart of the gift itself, for it tends to erase itself as soon as it is given. Indeed, "as soon as it is given, that which is given, whatever it may be, imposes its presence, and this evidence obfuscates the act by which it is delivered,"⁴⁷ that is, the act of gift giving. Once the gift is handed over, it steals our attention toward its phenomenality and away from the act that forms it as gift in the first place. In the very act of being given, that is, given *as gift*, the gift effaces its "gift-ness" by its very appearing as a valuable thing. In this way, the value of the gift

⁴⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," in *The Essential Writings*, ed. Kevin Hart (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 157.

⁴⁶ Marion, 157-158.

⁴⁷ Marion, 158.

conceals its gift-ness to the point of forgetting it altogether. Marion thus comes to recognize the aporetic nature of the gift: in order to appear as gift, it cannot appear at all; conversely, if the gift appears, then it does not appear as gift.⁴⁸

Having followed Derrida thus far, Marion now asks whether these critiques can in turn be criticized. He cites gratuity (which I will call *gratuitousness* for the sake of clarity) as the necessary presupposition at the heart of the gift: “the gift implies a perfect and pure gratuit[ousness], in which it is necessary to give for nothing, without there ever being a return.”⁴⁹ But the gift, though it presupposes gratuitousness, always comes to contradict itself by collapsing into its antithesis: the economic exchange. We see, in fact, that each component of the phenomenon of gift giving annuls the possibility of the gift by collapsing into an economic exchange: the giver, in receiving gratitude, praise, and even self-satisfaction, does not give gratuitously but rather exchanges the gift for what is received in return; the recipient, whether he establishes a debt structure, claims to be receiving his due, or gives something in return, rejects gratuitousness in favor of an exchange (present or future); even the gift itself, in erasing its gift-ness through its appearance as valuable, presupposes an exchange—or at least the possibility of exchange. For, Marion argues, in order to have a value at all, the gift must be evaluated in terms of the possibility of its exchange for something else, which in turn necessitates a commercial circulation in which the only way to give is through trade, through an exchange.⁵⁰

The question thus arises, how can the gift in its gratuitousness avoid the economic horizon entirely, if at all? Marion concludes

that the economic horizon must be abandoned altogether if the gift is to be possible. In fact, the gift is possible only as unconditional possibility, as a pure given within the radical horizon of givenness that precedes and thus has no need for metaphysical principles.⁵¹ The economic horizon, by contrast, necessitates that its phenomena be self-identical and have sufficient reason, and reveals itself as a metaphysical horizon the moment it forces its phenomena to subscribe to these metaphysical principles—i.e., the principles of sufficient reason and identity. The gift must therefore appear against a horizon that abolishes these principles, and givenness is precisely such a horizon⁵². But in what sense does the gift transgress against the principle of identity?

Now, I would like to offer a simpler solution to the predicament outlined above, one that entails a redefinition of gift and exchange. Marion claims that when gift giving becomes an exchange, the gift therefore does not obtain. Thus, when the value of the gift obscures the fact that it has been given; when the recipient decides that the gift indebts him and must be repaid; when the giver experiences satisfaction at having given a gift—in each case the giving is an exchange, and thus, Marion reasons, the gift is annulled, no longer a gift. This reasoning makes two fundamental assumptions. First, that the establishment of economic exchange necessarily means that gratuitousness has not and cannot be achieved—in other words, that gratuitousness and economic exchange are in fact opposites. This seems to stand not only in the eyes of common sense—which presumes that if something is exchanged for something else, it by definition cannot be gratuitous—but more importantly in the court of reason, where Marion argues quite

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Marion, 159.

⁵⁰ Marion, 160.

⁵¹ Marion, 171-80.

⁵² Marion, 164-7.

eloquently that any type of exchange implies both the attribution of an objective value and a commercial transaction. But is this necessarily so? Let us verify this.

Gift giving is a long lived and ubiquitous institution, present also in cultures quite different from the Western, as Marcel Mauss showed at the beginning of the last century⁵³. We can therefore say that the gift as a phenomenon predates both Derrida and Marion. If these philosophers are to think fruitfully about the gift, their definitions, conjectures and conclusions should conform to the gift as it appears and has been appearing for millennia—and *not* vice versa. It seems, however, that Marion's essay attempts the converse process, namely to force the gift into a definition that does not reflect its phenomenological essence. A simple example will illustrate my point. While browsing books at a bookstore, I come across a book that I am certain a friend of mine would enjoy. As I am very fond of this friend, I buy the book and give it to him as a gift. I even write on the inside of the cover, "I hope you enjoy this gift from your friend." My friend receives it gladly, and the unexpected gift remains in his mind so that for my birthday he makes it a point to give me a gift, though we usually do not exchange gifts for our birthdays. Now, according to the framework that I summarized at the beginning of this piece, this gift would in reality lose its status as gift, for my friend, having kept in mind my gift, gave me a gift in return, thus turning the gift giving into an exchange. But is it reasonable to say that the book I gave him is

not a gift? What do we mean by gift in the first place?

I readily follow Marion when he defines the gift according to gratuitousness, i.e., according to a free bestowal that provides without a return and gives at no cost to the recipient. Marion understands this to mean that in order for gratuitousness to be achieved, it is necessary *actually* to give for nothing, so that the recipient's interpretation of receiving as indebteding negates gratuitousness. This is, in my view, the problem with Marion's understanding of the gift: that gratuitousness depends on the final outcome of gift giving. By contrast, I would claim that gratuitousness should be understood as *intention*,⁵⁴ so that for the gift to be a gift it is enough to give it without expecting or intending to receive anything in return. This understanding is both more effective and truer to the actual phenomenon of gift, for it allows us to understand the book in the given example as a true gift, regardless of how my friend decides to respond.

This understanding of gratuitousness has several implications that must be explored and contrasted to Marion's conclusions. First, it means that it is the giver that makes the gift what it is, as the intention of gratuitousness lies on the side of the giver, depends on the giver. Thus, the book I give my friend is a gift so long as I give it for no reason other than because I want my friend to have it. If, by contrast, I give him money with the understanding that he will repay me, then this is, quite sensibly, a loan and not a gift. But if I give my friend the book, and my intention is merely for him to have it and enjoy it, and my friend nevertheless feels indebted to me and gives me something in return, gift giving is accomplished notwithstanding the

⁵³ Marcel Mauss, and W. D. Halls. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990; originally *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* published in *L'Année Sociologique* in 1925.

⁵⁴ Here I do not use this term according to its meaning in phenomenology.

recipient's reception of or reaction to the gift received. The recipient's attitude toward the gift cannot undo the gift's gift-ness. Just as the giver can neither foresee nor control how the recipient will react to the gift, the recipient has no power over the gratuitousness with which the giver imbues the gift. This means that, according to this understanding of gratuitousness, the recipient is excluded from the phenomenon of gift giving and from the horizon of gratuitousness that allows the gift to appear as gift. Concomitantly, the giver and her gift can elude the horizon of economy and stand outside it, regardless of how the gift is received. Within the same line of reasoning it is evident also that the gift itself has no say in its essence as gift. Whether it be a man-made object, a natural object, or even a non-object (e.g., time, affection, care), it matters not. That the gift might have a value according to the recipient, the witness, or the market, and that the gift might be regarded according to this value and not its gratuitousness—this, too, does not matter. What ultimately makes the gift a gift is that the giver gives the gift according to a lack of conditions: the gift is simply given, without remainder, with no expectations, no calculations, no presumptions. Thus, the gift is excluded from the horizon of gratuitousness just as the recipient, for the heart of the gift, its gratuitousness, depends on the giver and not on the gift itself.

There is an objection that arises despite our efforts to justify the possibility of the gift, an objection that demands a response from us: does not the satisfaction that a giver receives as a result of his giving, an admittedly natural self-satisfaction, pose a last, insurmountable impediment for gift giving? Indeed, it seems that if the giving of a gift engenders in the giver satisfaction, then we have returned to a scenario where the gift again collapses into exchange, where the gift is given and satisfaction is received

in return. Marion makes us aware of this problem and seeks to disentangle himself from it ("One may very well be satisfied as a result of a gift, without that satisfaction having been foreseen and preceding the gift as its motivation")⁵⁵. But this proves impossible so long as he remains within the horizon of economy. This horizon will always understand any benefit that comes as a result of giving as the equal and opposite reaction that completes the exchange. However, if we understand the gratuitousness of the gift as a horizon of intention, as I have suggested, then the satisfaction or joy that comes--naturally--as a result of giving poses no objection so long as it is not sought, so long as it does not comprise the motivation for giving. In fact, Marion himself posits that "It could even be that we receive this satisfaction only because we have *not* looked for it, nor forecast it, nor foreseen it--in short, it could be that satisfaction engulfs us precisely because it happens to us unexpectedly, as a bonus"⁵⁶. Considering the gift as that which consists of the giver's pure and gratuitous intention allows it, in its surplus, to work both ways: as a given thing, it leaves the giver to find its recipient, only to return to its bestower a joyous echo of itself, one that, rather than abolishing the gift, completes its cycle.

If the gift is understood as given gratuitously according to the intention of the giver—as, I believe, the nature of gift giving dictates—the gift is freed from the economy of exchange without the need to resort, as Marion does, to an excessively ethereal understanding of the gift as unconditioned possibility with no reason and no self-identity. Obviously, much more work can and should be done in order to justify the line of argument that I have here only briefly outlined. But I hope that this understanding

⁵⁵ Marion, 159.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

of the gift will spur more inquiry as to its essential nature and its possibility.