The Ethics of the Gift:

According to Aquinas, Derrida and Marion

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Abstract: *This article develops a philosophical-ethical theory of the "Gift," drawing on Jean Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. Western ontology is then understood from this theory of Gift, where the self-other relationship is given primacy over the more traditional subject-object relationship. This theory then forms the framework of understanding Jesus Christ's self-giving of his life for others. Finally, this leads into Aquinas' theology of the Holy Spirit as God's self-Gift, experienced in the life of grace by creatures.*

This article will seek to develop a moral theory, the basic framework of which is the "Gift." Moral theory in this context means the way in which we make sense of our lives as narrative wholes, directed towards goals and composed of relationships and action. Briefly, the suggestion is that what makes sense of life is the giving and receiving of gifts.[1]

The theory will have a philosophical component, and will be elaborated through a critical dialogue with certain contemporary thinkers, in particular Jacques Derrida and Jean Luc Marion, who have made important contributions to contemporary philosophy, in particular by elaborating the theme of Gift.[2] I adopt the suggestion of Derrida that the ideal ethical act is the gratuitous giving of one's life for another. It is obvious that such a notion would be recognizable from within the Christian moral tradition. My purpose is to bring this philosophical insight into contact with the theological conception of self-giving, such that through a critical dialogue between the two we may gain a deeper insight into its meaning.

This dialogue will reveal that, if Derrida's notion is to be adopted into the Christian tradition, we will need to critique and transform the idea of ethics that he presupposes and, indeed, the reasons why he considers it the ideal ethical act. On the other hand, if we take self-giving for the other as the basic framework for interpreting the Christian moral tradition, we will find that it makes possible a coherent understanding of that tradition, such that its theological resources come more clearly into view and assume the central

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[1] "Gift" (capitalized) will be used to refer to this notion as the theme of the philosophical discussion, while "gift" indicates the general sense of the word.

[2] The most accessible account is Robyn Horner, *Marion, Derrida and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). It is acknowledged that the thought of these authors, particularly that of Derrida, is difficult if not impossible to systematize. What I propose to draw from their work is stimulus and suggestion, not an organized theory.

position which is their due. When we turn to the scriptural presentation of the self-giving of Jesus, we find resources of language and thought that enable us to transform further the very notion of self-gift. It will be this transformed conception of self-gift which I will suggest as the framework for a moral theory.

There are, of course, scriptural grounds for situating self-giving for the sake of others at the centre of a Christian moral vision; the accounts of Jesus's giving of his life being the obvious point of reference. However, the centrality of gift can also be supported by a recovery of the resources of the Christian theological tradition, as represented by St. Thomas Aquinas. I will propose that by making self-gift the basis, we can elaborate an ethical system that can be accepted as rational, and thus, at least in theory, available to all. At the same time we can develop an ethic from within the tradition of Christian faith, a "faith ethic," where self-gift is a richer notion than that discovered by reason but is, nevertheless, recognizable by reason as a genuine attractive good. A rational person will be able, on principle, to understand what Christians mean by an ethic of self-giving, while Christians, having their own proper notion of self-giving will be able to communicate with these rational persons via a shared notion of self-giving. In this way, via a mutually meaningful notion of gift, the question of the relation between reason and faith in ethics may be fruitfully articulated.

Since the argument will be developed through a critical reception of the notion of Gift, some explanation is required of how the concept came to have the such a key place, at least within an important sub-tradition within the broad tradition of (Western) philosophy.

PHILOSOPHIES OF GIFT

Those philosophers who have developed the notion of Gift support, in some way, two basic theses. The first is that those systems of thought which are called metaphysics, as they have been developed in the Western philosophical tradition, prioritize being, substance, sameness, and permanence across time or presence, and so absorb all difference into sameness. These forms of thought, it is claimed, impose unity on plurality and stasis on change, thus wrapping everything and everyone in a static totality. In short, metaphysics excludes the "other." This exclusion is often characterized as a form of oppression or even of violence.

The second thesis is that the exclusion of the other has an ethical dimension, an idea which is obviously reflected in the notions of oppression and violence. Some, notably Derrida himself, have given the deconstruction program an ethical turn, where the "other" is now represented by those "others," marginalized individuals and groups, who are excluded by the presently existing forces of social and political domination, who use the old metaphysics to legitimate their oppression. Derrida has undertaken the deconstruction of ethics, meaning any kind of ethic which maintains absolute, permanent principles and norms; his target seems to be principally the rationalist ethic deriving from the Enlightenment. He has adopted "Gift" as the main vehicle for his deconstruction-reconstruction of ethics.

The critique of metaphysics, and its replacement by what some of its proponents call the "horizon of Gift," presumes that there are some criteria by which we can judge that this new way of thinking is superior to those forms of thought which are found wanting and are being rejected. The criteria cannot be derived from another form of all embracing and "dominating" metaphysics since this would this would be a contradiction of the basic claim

that metaphysics must be overcome and discarded. Thus, we may not presupposed that we have available a timeless, metaphysical notion of "reason" and similarly timeless criteria of reason by which to judge the success or failure of any particular forms of thought.

We may, however, adopt the theory that reason is manifested in its own history, that is in an historically extended, socially embodied argument, that is, in a living tradition as described by Alasdair MacIntyre.[3] As Michel de Certeau has written "reason is placed in question by its own history."[4] This I would interpret as implying that we can track the course of reason in its history, and thus derive criteria by which we can judge which forms of reason succeed and which fail. According to our authors, metaphysics has failed.

Besides this, metaphysics is seen as being at odds with our perception of the modern or "post-modern" world as pluralist and engaged in continual change. What is required then is a new way of thinking in which difference, plurality and process have priority, and which give due recognition to the other. This implies, in turn, that one criteria for successful reason is its capacity to make sense of and integrate our contemporary experience and interpretation of our world. It is important to note here that a theory of "historicism" could not satisfy the requirements of reason in history, nor the requirement that reason be able to interpret our present world. This is because "historicism" itself is a totalizing theory which attempts to force all experience and thought into an absolutized concept of history. This is precisely the kind of "metaphysical" tyranny which the philosophers of deconstruction and of Gift would have to reject.[5]

Some, notably Jacques Derrida, have undertaken a program of "deconstruction" aimed at demolishing the totalizing systems of metaphysics. Gift, which, it is claimed, transcends all conceptualized systems, has come to be adopted by deconstructionists as the unbounded parameter within which their project can progress. Of course, the question then arises as to whether Gift is actually different from metaphysics, or is, itself, a new form of metaphysics. It is precisely to avoid such a relapse that the notion of "Gift" must be unbounded, that is not containable within our general concepts.

Derrida's project is not aimed at ethical nihilism, as is sometimes alleged, but at bringing into view the forgotten others who are ignored by the established systems, for example, the tens of thousands of infants who die of salvation, while the nations, secure in their "ethics" of exclusion, do nothing. It is a major concern of the philosophers of Gift, to construct an ethic which transcends the commercial "economy" which they see as dominating our contemporary culture and excluding others. So intense is their concern to eliminate from their thought any form of this economy, that they seek to eliminate any form of exchange or reciprocity from their notion of gift. The ontological reason for excluding exchange is that it represents a system of though which excludes others, in the sense of other ways of thinking. The ethical reason for rejecting it is that an economic system of exchange, at least as we have it, excludes other people.

It is in the context of this search for a new kind of ethic that Derrida makes the suggestion to which I drew attention at the beginning of this article, namely that the gratuitous giving of one's life in sacrifice for the other is a response to absolute duty and is

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[3] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.

[4] Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies; Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 179; cited in Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion*: *Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 4.

[5] Cf. Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 398.

one's highest calling.[6] In short, such self-sacrifice is the ideal ethical act. This ideal is not based on utilitarian grounds, but derives from "absolute duty" and calling.

Metaphysics and Ontology in the Western Tradition

Following on from the discussion of criteria which was begun earlier, and the suggestion that the criteria of rationality are to be discerned in the history of reason, interpreted as an argument extended across time, it is now necessary to attempt to spell out in more detail what these criteria might be. Thus we need to ask, in regard to the Western philosophical tradition, what the argument was about, and what was the framework or "ontology" in terms of which a response was sought.[7] A plausible suggestion is that the argument was about the relation of self to other. In seeking to provide an answer, different ontologies have been proposed. We can assess the "success" of these ontologies in regard to their capacity to deal with the central problem of the relation of self to other. In particular, we may assess the success of otherwise of the theory of Gift on the basis of its capacity to deal with this issue. Similarly we may assess a theologically based moral theory on the grounds of its capacity, or lack of it, to deal with the relationship between self and other, on the human level, and between self and other, where the other is God. For example, we can show that a theory based on self-giving can do better than a theory based on law or order.

Oliver Davies has recently provided a helpful analysis of ontology in which he suggests that we may consider *being* as the medium between the self and other. On this basis, he suggests, we can distinguish four types of ontology.[8] The first type focuses on the medium itself, rather than on the self and the other, and stresses being as a unity or totality; it tends to reduce the many to the same. This type begins with Parmenides, and concludes, according to Davies, with Heidegger. The central issue is the relation of self to being, that is to the whole, rather than that of self to the other. The second type, arises from the Judeo-Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo*, here being stands over against nothingness; thus being itself is a gift, originally a gift from God. Being, so understood, is inherently relational, and the relationship itself is personal in origin. Thus, in this way of thinking, the self and the other, which both receive the gift of being, are inextricably related to each other, in receiving, with their being, the capacity to give to others. The "sameness" expressed in the (analogical) notion of being, does not obliterate the difference between the self and the other, nor the difference between the self and the other, and the transcendent other, God, who is the source of the gift of being.

A third type gives priority to the self. In this case, the other is set apart as separate, yet risks being absorbed into the self in the process of thinking. Here, of course, we recognize Descartes and Kant, for this form of ontology tends to reduce being to being as thought by the subject, to the exclusion of real being. Then there is a fourth mode where ontology begins from the separate other. The other imposes itself on the self-subject.

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[6] Jacques Derrida, "Donner la mort," in Jean-Michel Rabaté and Michael Wetzel, eds. *L'éthique du don: Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don* (Paris: Métailie-Transition, 1992), 45. The English translation is, *Jacques Derrida's The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[7] Here I am attempting to combine MacIntyre's notion of tradition as argument, with Charles Taylor's notion of practical reason. We cannot appeal to an abstract idea of "reason" outside tradition, but we can seek to clarify within an argument the values which are, at least implicitly assumed. We can then seek to show whether particular positions within the argument are coherent with these values or not. See Charles Taylor, "Explanation and Practical Reason," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 34-60.

[8] Oliver Davies, *Theology of Compassion*, 49.

Though Davies links this type to materialism, it is also recognizable also in certain models of moral theology in the Catholic tradition. This kind of moral theology, in order to uphold objective morality, located morality in objects considered as separate from the subject. The "objective" morality was then imposed on subjects, usually with the support of authoritative teaching.

In this article, the key consideration is the second mode of ontology as described above. Characteristically it orders the self and other in terms of relationship, and, in particular, in terms of gift. It construes being in terms of an original gift, that is the gift of being given in creation. A brief analysis of this ontology will sketch the framework for the rest of the argument.

Contemporary philosophical attacks on ontology seem to be directed principally against the first and third type. The first is found wanting because of its totalizing proclivities, that is, its tendency to absorb the self and the other into the one, same entity which excludes difference. The third is rejected because of its tendency to absorb the other into the self. The fourth fails because it imposes the other on the self, as in the case of materialistic ideologies, an imposition which required also a powerful will. The second, as I have argued above, can sustain both sameness and difference, and self and other, without absorbing one in the other. This is the kind of ontology best able to deal with the problems that was posed above, namely how to maintain both sameness and difference, and so to respect both self and other.

In Davies' analysis the terms the self and the other are basic. There is another term-pair which frequently enters into the philosophical discussion, namely, subject and object. To avoid confusion, I will seek to clarify the relationship between the two sets. The self-other relationship has primacy; the subject-object relationship explicates this, in the sense that it interprets the self as subject and the other as object. But these terms likewise can be made sense of as elements in the argument about the relationship of self and other.

In consequence, the way the subject-object relationship is understood reflects the different ways in which the self-other relationship, that is ontology, is construed. The first type of ontology referred to above, tends to subsume both subject and object under being. In contrast, the third type separates the two; it makes the subject the source of knowledge and value, while the object is set apart as inert, and needing to be given value by another source. The fourth type imposes the object on the subject, reducing it to a merely passive receiver. In the light of the second type of ontology, and developing further Davies's suggestion that for this type, being itself is gift, I would proposes the following. Any created thing is ultimately a gift from God, and has the character of a potential giver or receiver or "gift" to another. In this context the subject will mean primarily "giver" or "receiver." "Objects" of any kind, must be seen primarily in terms of gift, that is, as what is given or received. Though this aspect has not been a major concern in the philosophical analysis of the subject-object problem, once we accept the primacy of gift, what I have said follows. The basic structures of ontology, in this view, would rest on a dual subjectivity: the giver is a subject; the receiver is a subject; the object is the relationship of giving and receiving together with the entity which is given.

Charles Taylor has provided an analysis of the subject-object problem in the philosophical tradition, and this can serve to enlarge our perspective on the philosophical issues under discussion. His account can also enable us to explain the difference between metaphysics and ontology; an important distinction to which writers have not given sufficient attention. Taylor, addressing the change to modernity in Western thinking and culture, describes a major shift that has occurred in terms of the disengagement of subject

and object.[9] We could extend his distinction into the separation of the self and the other. A profound change has occurred in the accounts of knowing and willing. In one account, true knowledge and true valuation come from connecting ourselves rightly to reality or to the "world," the other, in its ontic significance.[10] Reality means something which is there, with its own proper intelligibility and value: a created given. In the other account, where the third mode of ontology (as described above) prevails, true knowledge and valuation are sought within the subject. As Taylor writes: "The valuation is now unambiguously not in the object, but *in minds*, ours or God's."[11]

Classic metaphysics, I would argue, belongs to that account in which knowledge is considered to put us in contact with reality. Ontology, on the other hand, has its origins within an conception of knowledge as residing in the subject.[12] Metaphysics sought to discover the laws inherent in reality; ontology was concerned with the laws of thought. It would seem that some contemporary efforts to construct a new ontology still retain the focus on the subject, or human subjectivity, although wanting to include "cosmological readings" of the creatureliness of the word and the self.[13] I would suggest that this is still too much within the sphere of the separated subject. What is proposed in this article is that we begin with the action of gift, on the human level, which necessarily includes subjects (givers and receivers) and objects (the giving and what is given.). Thus, the separateness of subject and object can be overcome from the outset.

To speak generally, the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas belongs to the first account described by Taylor,[14] and in the second mode of ontology as presented by Davies. However, Taylor's phrase "ontically," if applied to St. Thomas, can lead to misunderstanding. We should not interpret St. Thomas as holding that the world is subsumed within one determined concept, such as "being," and so unified "ontically" in this sense. St. Thomas's metaphysics does not belong in the first of Davies's types.

For St. Thomas metaphysics is a sapiential way of understanding, which seeks order: Given this quality of thinking wisdom, metaphysics should not be "re-ified" as if it referred to a determined unity grasped in given concepts.[15] This point is important; such a version of metaphysics is, I believe, the target of the contemporary assault on metaphysics. Since I wish to argue that the ontology of gift may be considered as basic to Aquinas's ethics, and that this may help in the construction of the moral theory that I propose, it is important establish that this form is not to be identified with the "metaphysics" that is rejected by the contemporary critics. That is not to say, however, that Aquinas own version of metaphysics may not also need transformation: I am claiming only that his account deals more adequately with the relationship between self and other than do the rival accounts. .

Generally speaking, pre-modern philosophy, (either the tradition beginning with Parmenides or the creation metaphysics of St. Thomas), presupposed a unified world, even if, in the case of St. Thomas, that unity is not a fixed given, but something we must

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[9] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 186.

[10] Taylor, *Sources*, 186.

[11] Taylor, *Sources,* 187.

[12] Cf. Étienne Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948), 141.

[13] Davies sets out to develop an ontology "primarily viewed under the aspect of human subjectivity " (*Theology of Compassion,* xvi). I would challenge the primacy of subjectivity.

[14] Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 129.

[15] Jean-François Courtine, *Suarez et le systéme de la métaphysique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1900) 31-34.

still seek to discover. Thus, St. Thomas develops a view of the world, united by reason, in which all created realities have their proper *rationes*, or "meanings," which are ultimately grounded in the reason, or ideas, of God.[16] But these realities are not simply ideas, they are embodied ideas; the *ratio* is expressed in the corresponding matter. Reason and reality are inherently related to each other, within unifying reason, which is ultimately a participation in the reason of God. Further, since all finite beings exist by reason of the gift of being, the *ratio* of gift must be an inherent element of their meanings.

In this scheme, subject and object can be distinguished but not separated. Subject and object, or self and other, would be meaningless without their mutual relationship. Further, since each and every being has its proper *ratio* or meaning, it has its own proper way of being a gift, and its own potentiality for being a gift. No object, then, should be considered a *mere* object; it must always be seen in its relationships to others. Similarly, no subject can be considered as an isolated or separate subject, separated, that is, from other subjects or from the world.

With the loss of this unified vision, the subject and object became separated, and the latter left without any source of value in itself – a change often associated historically with William of Ockham.[17] Because the object had no such inherent value, this had to be supplied for by reference to an external will and here we have the emergence of voluntaristic ethics. (By way of contrast, a gift has value in itself, it is give-able by reason of its nature, not because it is simply willed as such God or by a human giver or receiver.)

At a later stage in the tradition, Descartes, of course, was the key figure in the dissociation of the subject from nature. Nature, as object, was no longer considered to be endowed with its morally relevant *ratio*, that is, a meaning which provided moral guidance. From this situation emerged those kinds of moral theory which sought to find guiding structures in the subject, and in particular in the reasoning of that subject. To be rational now means to think according to certain laws, not of things, but of rationality itself as located in the subject.

At a later stage again, this focus on the separated subject was maintained, but reason was set aside in favour of emotion, and the way was opened to the emotivist ethics which, according to Alisdair MacIntyre, pervade the culture of our era.[18] What might well be considered the classic statement of the significance on the separation of subject and object, at this period, is a much cited text from David Hume. Arguing that vice and virtue are not matters of fact, which can be inferred by reason, he writes:

The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You can never find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object.[19]

Thus, a way of giving, and the gift itself, would be right or good, not because of the nature of the giving, or of the gift itself, but solely because of our feelings about them.

To return to the story that unfolded in European philosophy, I offer the following very simplified schema: Husserl seeks to bridge the gap between subject and object with the "intentionality" of consciousness; Heidegger seeks to do the same with "being" which

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[16] St. Thomas's *ratio* seems to be seems to be close to Taylor's term "ontic logos."

[17] Taylor, Sources, 161. However, the standard interpretation of Ockham needs to be corrected. See Sigrid Müller, *Handeln in einer kontingenten Welt: Zum Begriff und Bedeutung der rechten Vernunft (recta ratio) bei Wilhelm von Ockham* (Tübingen and Basle, Franke Verlag, 2000).

[18] Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 23.

[19] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 468-469.

shows itself in the comportment of the subject to the world; Levinas seeks to overcome the separation of the subject from the other, by invoking the subject's ethical responsibility for the other. In the course of these reflections, he introduced the notion of Gift; Derrida and Marion develop further the ontological and ethical implications of Gift.[20]

There have been a number of important endeavours within the Western philosophical tradition which may be understood as seeking to overcome the separation between subject and object, or self and other. The German phenomenologist Max Scheler might be interpreted within this schema. According to the "modern" scheme, the structures of human psychology, such as desires or feelings, should be taken as purely objective; they become "other" and as such embody no moral value in themselves. (This assumption can be seen in the text from Hume that I have cited.) Desires and feelings are like things that objective psychology studies. Scheler, challenges this view.[21] He claimed that, on the contrary, values are to be experienced precisely in these "feelings." He attempted to restore values to the objective realm, from which modernity had removed them. However, he seems to have been unable to break completely with that kind of philosophy which proceeds by the analysis of the consciousness of the subject, and so from the third type of ontology. Feeling seems to remain the feeling of a separated subject, and values, despite his intention, remain essentially situated in this subject.[22]

This would appear to have been a point at which Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope, took issue with Scheler. For Wojtyla, the subject is to be considered an "effective" subject, that is an acting subject, or more specifically an acting person. In the terms of the framework that I am using here, we could say that it is in *action* that the separation of subject and object, or separation of self and other, is overcome; hence the title of the book: *The Acting Person*.[23] Wojtyla's proposal was that it is action which overcomes the separation of subject and object. What I am proposing in this article is that it is the action, precisely in the form of giving and receiving the gift, which is fundamental in this respect

The emergence of extended reflection on the Gift, as in the writings of Derrida and Marion, may be interpreted as part of an extended endeavour within the tradition of reason, or to put it more specifically, within the Western philosophical tradition, to overcome the split between self and other, subject and object. It is for this reason that I propose that we can drawn on their philosophical reflections in the structuring of ethics. "Gift" or more particularly (for Marion) the "horizon" of giftedness, now assumes the role of making possible a shared meaning of the "world" including subject and object, self and other. However, according to the requirements of our philosophers, it must be able to do this without reverting to another form of (oppressive) metaphysics.[24] Further, to respond to the argument which has provided the inner framework of the philosophical tradition, it must be able to do this by respecting the relationship between self and other, in particular,

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[20] Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné : Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation,* 2nd ed (Paris: PUF, 1998) 441. The phenomenon of donation, for Marion breaks ultimately with the (separated) subject, while not destroying the subject.

[21] Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 197-198.

[22] Thus, I concur with Finnis's critique of Scheler, and of Bernard Lonergan. See John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1983), 32.

[23] Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, *The Acting Person,* trans. Andrzej Potocki (Dordrecht: D. Riedel, 1979). The original Polish text was published in 1969.

[24] On the debate as to whether metaphysics is indeed "accomplished" or overcome, see Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," in Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 52.

by not allowing one to absorb the other, nor allowing both to be absorbed in one totality. In crude terms, an adequate solution must avoid subjectivism, objectivism and totalitarianism.

Derrida declares the gift to be impossible.[25] He writes: "as soon as a gift is identified as a gift, with the meaning of a gift, then it is cancelled as a gift. It is reintroduced into the circle of exchange and destroyed as a gift."[26] As a commentator has explained: "As soon as a donor gives someone a gift, that puts the recipient in debt and makes the donor look good, thereby taking from the recipient and adding to the donor, which is the opposite of what the gift was supposed to do."[27] In Derrida's thinking, Gift must be impossible, that is, not containable within the fixed categories of metaphysics. If it were so containable we would be putting it back into those categories and thus defeating the whole point of the deconstructionist project.

However, to say that the Gift is impossible does not mean, for Derrida, that we should give up on it. To say that it is "impossible" means that the notion is beyond the range of present metaphysics, not that it unthinkable. It is impossible in terms of the structures in which human understanding and action is presently embedded. What we have here is a particular instance of Derrida's project of "deconstructing" the prevailing conceptual frameworks so as to enable thought (and action) to proceed beyond them. It is precisely the "impossibility" of the gift, in these terms, that draws and attracts us to break from these structures.

How is this "break" to be brought about? Here we must think on the "fault lines" which lie between economy, held up by those thought systems (metaphysics) which sustain the other-excluding status-quo, and the impossible pure Gift. If I give the gift to the receiver, with the expectation of a reward, that is, remaining within the economy, then I cannot give the gift to the receiver, because I am actually seeking something (reward) for myself. It is only if I refer the gift to the Other, thus putting the gift beyond exchange and economy, that I can really give the gift to the receiver whom I envisioned in the first place. I no longer need a reward from this receiver, so that my giving can be truly free.[28] Of course, while the pure gift, in this sense, is thinkable, it is quite another question as to whether such purity can ever be actually achieved. Even when the giver gives his life for me, I can only believe, in faith, that the gift was pure.[29]

How are we to understand the phrase "refer the gift to the Other?" Derrida, in his extended commentary on the Abraham-Isaac story (Gen 22:1-18) displays the paradoxes of giving. He recognizes that precisely in the very moment of the sacrifice of Isaac, when all prospect of recompense is definitively excluded, God decides by an "absolute gift" to restore his son to Abraham, and, in this sense, to re-inscribe the sacrifice of life into an economy which resembles an economy of reward.[30] It is because Abraham has renounced absolutely any economy of reward, that economy can now be re-appropriated as an "a-economy" of gift, specifically as the gift of life, or, what amounts to the same thing, the gift

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[25] The current discussion on gift, in fact, takes up again elements of the age old discussion on friendship, and the question of "altruistic" disinterested friendship. See, for example, Gilbert C. Meilander, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Note Dame Press, 1981). But the question of gift is more specific.

[26] A summary of his views is provided by Derrida himself in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 59.

[27] Caputo and Scanlon, *God, the Gift*, 4.

[28] Horner, *Rethinking God*, 207.

[29] Horner, *Rethinking God*, 210.

[30] Derrida, "Donner la mort," 91.

of death.[31] Thus, to say that the gift is referred to the Other, means that it is now attributed to God, who, without being bound in any way by the normal economy of gift, gives the gift "absolutely," that is, with absolute gratuity. Here we can see how Derrida's deconstruction works: in this instance he subverts the standard notion of reward through the notion of absolute gift, but then re-instates it, beyond the standard categories, in a transformed way.

Similarly, he subverts the standard notion of responsibility, that is responsibility governed by the rules of standard ethics, and absolute responsibility. Derrida thus recognizes that there are two levels or modes of giving. On the first level, responsibility is governed by the standard rules of ethics, but on the second level absolute responsibility prevails, and will seem "irresponsible" by the standards of ethics. The first level belongs to the economy where general principles and laws prevail, that is, the economy of justice in the usual sense, but the second is that sphere in which God who sees in secret, rewards in secret.[32] Secrecy is required, it seems, because otherwise the economy would be that "public" economy which Derrida considers to entail domination and the abolition of the possibility of the true gift. But this would seem to reduce the gift, and responsibility for the gift, in its authentic sense, solely to the inner world of the subject.

Does this mean that absolute gift, and so the absolute responsibility for the gift within the self, utterly transcend all structure? If that is the case, does this mean the responsibility that confronts us is formless, and does not this evoke memories of the naked will of voluntarism? If the only genuine gift has to be "secret" how is it possible to effectively critique those public structures of economy which oppress and exclude the "others?" Is one reduced simply to rejecting those structures *in toto*?

I suggest that, for the Christian tradition, the "second level" of gift, that is the level beyond the economy, is participation in the divine giving. Indeed, Derrida actually says something like this himself; the gift, to remain a genuine gift, has to be referred to God. This I take to mean that God, whose giving is absolutely gratuitous, obviously needs no reward. Thus a human giver who participates in the divine giving likewise is beyond reward. However, for Derrida, "God" does not refer to a personal God. The source of the absolute gift seems to be within the subject, God becomes "me," "absolute me."[33] God as "other" has disappeared, or has been absorbed into the human subject.

If my interpretation of Derrida's texts is correct, he has not been able, at least at this point in the development of his project, to solve the problem of the separated subject.[34] Further, since being able to deal with this problem was one of the criteria, within the tradition, of a successful theory, Derrida's own theory does not succeed on these terms. Perhaps this problem cannot be solved without reference to a God, who is not the absolute me, but a personal, really existing Other.

Of course, what Derrida may mean, is that the answer he gives is what is possible within the limits of the philosophy he pursues, that is, within a certain kind of phenomenology. Perhaps this is all he can say, since his presuppositions forbid the totalizing of any system, even his own. It would also have to be acknowledged that the text that I have commented on is, in all probability, not Derrida's last word on the subject. One

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[31] Derrida, "Donner la mort," 91.

[32] Derrida, "Donner la mort," 90.

[33] Derrida, "Donner la mort," 101.

[34] The roots of the limitations in Derrida's and Marion's account, are philosophical. According to John Milbank, they have not succeeded in liberating themselves from a "separate" notion of the subject. John Milbank, "The Soul of Reciprocity. Part One: Reciprocity Refused," *Modern Theology* 17:3 (July 2001) 346. See, however, note 17 above.

must also recall that Derrida has himself been engaged in numerous public causes on behalf of justice. His theory of absolute "interior" responsibility does not lead to ethical quietism.

Nevertheless there remain two major point of difficulty. The "ethics" that Derrida has in mind seems to be a highly individualistic ethics grounded in a secret encounter with the "other" as "absolute me." Further, it could seem that the reason why he gives priority to the gratuitous gift of one's life for another, is that he considers it the utmost expression of autonomy. Or is he saying that if one seeks the ultimate expression of autonomy one can find it only in the giving of one's life for another? Do we have here yet another paradox?

I now offer an "other" theory of "Gift" drawing on some scriptural and theological resources available in the Christian tradition. The proponents of the philosophy of Gift, while open to reflection on religion and on theology are very committed to respecting the boundaries between philosophy and theology. However, they cannot consistently maintain an absolute barrier between the two without making their own particular concept of philosophy an absolute. To do so would be to fail to respect the "other."

AN "OTHER" THEORY OF GIFT

Jesus' Gratuitous Gift of his Life for Others

Within the Christian tradition there are resources which provide grounds for the acknowledgment of self-sacrifice as the ideal ethical act. When we consider these, I suggest, certain possible connections with Derrida's theory come to light. Consider first a text from Matthew 26:39, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." A second, which calls for reflection, is from John 10: 18,

> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.[35]

These texts, I suggest, provide us with a more fruitful starting point than Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac, cited by Derrida.[36]

Matthew presents Jesus's mysterious "difference" from the will of the Father, only to show that this is followed by total acceptance. Difference does not prevail absolutely; it is subsumed in a ultimate unity of wills. But the unity does not mean the abolition of difference; Jesus's human will is not absorbed into the divine will, but retains its ontological "autonomy." The text of John shows Jesus as totally in control, he is, we might say, "autonomous" and totally free in his choice to lay down his life for others, but also to take it up again. The laying down and the taking up again, in complete autonomy, are, however, expressions of obedience to the command of the Father and call forth the love of the Father. But it is not, if we might use human terms, as if Jesus obeys the Father in order to earn the love of the Father as a reward. Rather, in obeying he enters into a participation in the Father's love which is, by nature, love that gives.

"Autonomy," if we may use the word here, is possible only in being one with the command of the Father, such that accepting the command manifests participation in the love of the Father. To take up life again, is to rise from the dead, now partaking fully in the "economy" of giving which has its source in the Father and so utterly transcends the

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[35] Translations from RSV.

[36] Derrida, "Donner la mort," 82.

economy of human exchange. Recognizably "ethical" concepts appear here, but they have a surplus meaning so that they cannot be contained adequately in a general ethical system. We need to "deconstruct" the accepted categories, so as to allow the nature of the gift to appear fully.

In particular, Jesus obedience to the Father cannot be reduced simply to an example of a general ethic of obedience to due authority. Jesus's obedience is prior to any system of ethics, it is superabundant with regard to our categories of obedience.[37] Yet it is still recognizable as "ethics." But this ethics beyond the margins is not an individualistic "existential" ethic, in which the separate subject is summoned, as an isolated individual, by divine decree. Rather Jesus's obedience is taken up into a relationship with the Father, which is not formless and dependent on arbitrary will, but has the constant character of self-gift. Furthermore, if there is to be self-giving, there must be a self to give. If contemporary philosophy, having deconstructed the notions of "God," and "substance," also deconstructs the notion of "self" (which of course it does) then how is self-giving thinkable?

Furthermore, the element of "taking up life" again, suggest an important qualification of the notion of self-sacrifice. The taking up again of life is not a matter of an egotistical reward, it is rather that Father has willed that the death of Jesus lead to resurrection and return to the Father.[38] If we are looking for a "pure" gift, as required by the theories of Derrida and Marion, that is, one not contaminated by such an expectation of reward, then we may find it here. To account for the "reward" beyond the crippling structures of metaphysics, Derrida requires the intervention of a "madness" on the part of Abraham, a transgression of standard structures so that when God gives the reward (the restoring of Isaac) it is in no way encompassed in the structures of exchange. Marion, on the other hand, consistently seeking to preserve the "otherness" of the other, and to avoid reducing the gift to an object of exchange, seems to maintain only the ideal notion of givenness, without any content, or actual gift.[39]

The scriptural texts, however, offer a different account of the significance of the gift and the "reward." The point of the story, in Jewish reflection, was Abraham's faithfulness to God, and in St. Paul's, the faithfulness of God.[40] Faithfulness is the issue, not a "reward." Perhaps we could say that it is not, ultimately, a question of being faithful in order to receive a reward, but that the reward itself is a participation in God's faithfulness, the realization of which is being raised from death, as the completion of the gratuitous gift of one's life.

Consider another text, Luke 6: 32-35, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you… But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." There is then to be no return at all. But again, "Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High." The "reward" is to become like God, the giver. Marion sees here a contradiction of the philosophical (Aristotelian) conception of friendship.[41]

We might suggest that in the Biblical vision, the self-giving is completed in another way than by reward as we usually understand this, that is, not in terms of some kind of

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[37] For these reasons I would resist the concept of "Christian ethics," which seems to imply that the Christian is merely a special case of a general ethics. I would similarly oppose the merely adjectival use of "theological" as in "theological ethics."

[38] Raymond E. Brown, *Giovanni: Commento al Vangelo spirituale*, 4th ed. (Assisi: Cittadella editrice, 1979), 521.

[39] John Milbank, "The Soul of Reciprocity: Part I, Reciprocity Refused," *Modern Theology* 17.3 (2001): 344.

[40] Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 225.

[41] Marion, *Étant donné,* 128, n.1.

"economy" but in union with the Father, who is the ultimate origin of the giving in the first place. The freedom with which Jesus gives his life, is a power given him by the Father as a gift, just as is the power to take up his life again. The giving and the taking up are two aspects of the same power and form one event. Thus the giving and taking up life by Jesus is itself a gift of the Father, whose will is characterized by giving.[42] Thus the "reward" is not so much a reward, as a being drawn into participation in the ultimate power to give, which is, of course, the power of the Father. Thus, I suggest, the scriptural accounts enable us to further "deconstruct" the theories of our philosophers, so as to free the notion of gift from limiting concepts and lay open the true nature of the Gift.

A Theology of Gift according to St. Thomas Aquinas

Up to this point the notion of gift has been analysed in general terms. But if it is to function as the framework for a moral theory, it needs to be articulated more fully in terms of its structure and content. To supply this I shall now turn to an exploration of gift in the Christian theological tradition, as represented in particular by St. Thomas. The suggestion that the notion of gift is the focus of theology – and moral theology in particular – is supported in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. He introduces the theme of gift in the questions dealing with the Holy Spirit as divine "gift."[43] Here, he cites St. Augustine, for whom the gift of the Holy Spirit, is nothing other than the Holy Spirit.[44] In explaining this, St. Thomas provides an account of the gift which may serve as the core meaning of the moral theory which I am proposing.

The notion of "gift" implies a relationship (aptitude) both to the one who gives and to the one to whom it is given. One cannot give a gift unless what is given belongs to one, as giver; while to give a gift to another, means that it now belongs to that other, or that the other has the gift. But to have something, means that the receiver may freely use (*uti*) and enjoy (*frui*) what is given as she wills.[45] Thus, for St. Thomas, a gift is not something given "with strings attached," it is not a disguised form of controlling the other, but a freeing of the other for enjoyment of the gift received.

In a brief remark which, I suggest, could provide a theological account of the basic possibility of gift, St. Thomas says that a rational creature can become a participant in the divine Word and the love proceeding from the Word, so that the creature can freely, truly know and rightly love God.[46] But this is not possible to a creature by its own powers, therefore a gift from an other is necessary. The gift is what makes possible what we might call in our terms "agency," the capacity to know and love in freedom. But this capacity is participation in the personal agency of the Word and the divine love, whence the gift originates.

In the following article, St. Thomas asks whether gift is the proper name of the Holy Spirit.[47] Here again, he analyses the meaning of gift, this time citing Aristotle.[48] Gift is, properly speaking, a gift which cannot be returned, that is, which is not given with the intention of receiving a return, and so is gratuitous. The origin of gratuitous giving is love;

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[42] Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Il vangelo di Giovanni,* part 2 (Brescia: Paideia, 1977), 502.

[43] S.Th. I, q. 38, aa.1 and 2.

[44] *De Trinitate,* XV, Cap. 19 (PL 42, 1086).

[45] These are, of course, Augustinian themes. See St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.11; q.16.

[46] S.Th. I, q.38, a.1.

[47] S.Th. I, q.38, a.2.

[48] *Topics,* IV, iv/12 (125a18).

we give something to someone *gratis* because we will that person well. Therefore, love is the first gift, for the sake of which all gifts are given gratuitously. The returning of the gift, in gratitude is not a benefit to the giver, which would undermine the gratuity, but rather the completion of the gratuitous gift in the receiver. The receiver is more gifted, precisely in being able to express gratitude and so enter more fully into the process of giving.

The notion of gift, for St. Thomas, is closely related to that of "grace." According to St. Thomas, in common usage, grace usually has three meanings.[49] In the first place it means the love (*dilectio*) of someone, so we say that one enjoys the good will (grace) of another, and the latter wishes her well; secondly, grace is used to indicate a gratuitous gift given to someone (*donum gratis datum*). Thirdly, the word may refer to the recompense given for the gratuitous gift; so we speak of giving thanks (grace) for a gift.

The second depends on the first: from the love by which someone wishes another well, follows the giving of the gratuitous gift. The recompense of giving thanks is not some kind of a payback for the gift received, nor is receiving a recompense the motive for the giving on the part of the donor. The giving of thanks is rather the full actualizing of the gift-giving. One's giving thanks in recompense is itself a further receiving, and what is received is participation in the gift giving of the Word and the Spirit. Reciprocity in the form of recompense is thus conceivable, without undermining the very concept of the gift.

I suggest that this could be related to the scriptural account mentioned above: the self-giving of Jesus, in the giving of his life for others, does not lead to an added reward in the form of resurrection, rather the resurrection is a deeper participation in the divine giving which made possible that self-giving.

According to Thomas O'Meara, the *Summa* is structured according to the notion of "grace." In particular, the whole of the *IIa* Pars, that is St. Thomas's moral theology, and not only the specific segment given to the theme,[50] can be considered as a treatise on grace.[51] In this sense, St. Thomas's "moral theology" is a theology of gift. I propose to follow him here, by taking grace-gift as the theological dimension of the proposed theory of morality. The moral law, accordingly would mean ultimately the grace-gift of the Holy Spirit and, on the level of human articulation, the "rules" which order the giving and receiving of gifts.[52] While we believe that the ground of the possibility of loving is the divine love, and properly the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can articulate what that love requires in terms of the human concept of the gift, but now transformed according to the possibilities made available by theological reflection. From this, in turn, we can derive the basic norms of morality.

Thus, the primary requirement is love, love of the human other, which is a participation in divine love. Love itself is the first level of gift. Love is required by its own nature to recognize the other; such recognition is the first gift. Further, love seeks to express itself in the giving of further gifts to that other. The other is "objective," it is not to product of the thinking or choosing of the subject. But we are not dealing here with a *separate* other; the other is necessarily included in the relationship of giving and receiving. Similarly, the "objective" nature of the gift itself must be taken into account: the gift must be objectively appropriate for the other, as recipient. (A loaf a bread can be a gift for a hungry child, a stone cannot).

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[49] S. Th. I-II, q. 110, a. 1.

[50] S. Th. I-II, 109-114.

[51] Thomas F. O'Meara, "Grace as a Theological Structure in the Summa theologiae of Thomas Aquinas," *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale* 55 (1988): 144.

[52] Cf. S.Th., I-II, q.106.

Love as the primal gift, expresses itself in concrete gift-giving and this entails structures in the act of giving which must be respected if it is to be indeed a gift giving. These structures provide the basis on which we can articulate moral values and norms. For example, before I may give a gift to another, I must assure that it is mine to give; similarly when the receiver has the gift as hers; structures of justice are required for the full, social realization of the gift.[53]

Particular "standard" norms and standards of justice which are constructed in the tradition, when confronted with the notion of the purely gratuitous gift, with its absolute rejection of any form of oppression and manipulation, may be revealed as, in fact, unjust. What is required by absolute responsibility for the Gift is that they be reconstructed. This is the work which goes on within the tradition. Gift, as the ultimate criteria, is both positive and negative: it requires love, freedom and reciprocity: it condemns manipulation. But the concrete historical forms of a reconstructed justice may also, in the course of history, be revealed as unjust. The process of critique and reconstruction then beings again.

CONCLUSION

The moral theory which I propose begins, not in the separated subject, nor in the separated object, but in the relationship of subject to subject, via object, in the act of giving. The act of giving itself is, furthermore, ultimately intelligible only in the light of the divine gifts of being and of grace.

Thus, I conclude, that the account of Gift which has been developed here through a dialogue between philosophy and theology, can provide a response to the long argument in the tradition concerning the relationship between self and other, and subject and object. It allows both subject (giver) and (subject) receiver to be maintained in their autonomy, precisely by being engaged in giving and receiving the gift. Thus, this account, is superior, in terms of the tradition itself, to that provided by the contemporary philosophers of Gift. The latter, I have claimed, seem ultimately to reduce the other to the "other" within the subject, at least in the case of Derrida.

This other still bears the traits of the "autonomous self" of modern European philosophy. But here again, we are compelled by the logic of the philosophical tradition to think further. If we really desire to be autonomous, we will find that ultimate autonomy can be found only in the gratuitous gift of one's life for the other. This is what noone else can do for us. Yet this gift is revealed as both desirable, "impossible" and yet desirable because "impossible." For the Christian the impossible becomes possible because giving the gratuitous gift is a participation in the giving of God.

The implications of adopting the framework of gift as basic to a moral theory for moral theology can now be illustrated in broad outline. Philosophically, the theory would not be developed through an analysis of the necessary presuppositions of the abstract ideal act, namely the idea of gratuitous gift of one's life for others. Rather it would explore those conditions which made possible real, historical acts of gratuitous self-giving. We would need to being with historical narratives as Davies does with his accounts of the lives of Edith Stein or Etty Hillesum, and of the anonymous woman in Bosnia Herzegovina.[54] These stories would need to be interpreted in terms of the frameworks within which the

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[53] Something cannot be given by another unless it the other's to give; and it is given to someone in order that it be his. Cf. S.Th. I, q.38, a.1.

[54] Davies, *Theology of Compassion,* 25.

participants understood what they were doing. We would want to know "what made them do it," because that "why" is the reason we may want to adopt ourselves. Finally, we would explore the framework of understanding which made possible Jesus self–giving. At this point exegesis and hermeneutics would enter as essential parts of the moral inquiry.

The theory does not attempt to derive an ethic from some idea, be it the idea of freedom as with Kant, or from the ideas of "goods" as in the theory of Germain Grisez. The opening point of reflection will not be a subject and that subject's action, but the relationship of giver (subject) to receiver (subject) through the giving and what is given (object). Nor is the starting point an "objective" entity as separated from the subject, but again the objective relation, embodied in the action of giving and receiving, which relates the subjects.

It is this relationship which expresses the primary moral meaning. In assessing moral goodness/rightness and badness/wrongness the initial reference will not be to a correspondence with a law or order, but to a narrative of the ideal act of self-giving, followed by a philosophical interpretation of that narrative. The properly theological reference, likewise, will not be to the "law of God" but to the historical reality of Jesus' act of self-giving, and then to the process of divine giving, beginning with the Father, and realized in the divine gift, which is the personal reality of the Holy Spirit. This will require a particular interpretation of certain key moral notions.

The notion of "merit" will no longer be thought of in terms of reward in the economic sense, but as the completion of the diving gift. Freedom, will mean not a general, formless freedom, but the freedom to give and receive the gift. "Law" will mean not patterns of behaviour imposed by the will of another, but the structures necessary to sustain the giving and receiving of gifts. Virtue will mean not moral qualities constituting the perfection of the subject, but the capacities for giving and receiving gifts in diverse modalities. Friendship, on the Aristotelian model, will be transcended by radical gratuity. Justice will mean the constant will to give to the other so that the other may receive and have what is necessary for that other to become a giver and receiver. This requires as a necessary condition that the giver genuinely has what is to be given, in a socially secured form, and that the receiver can have what is received, again in a socially secured form. Gifts socially secured in this way are "due" to the other, because of the nature of the Gift. The relationships of justice cannot of course be limited to gifts, but just relationships are those which provide the necessary conditions for giving and receiving

Finally, a different concept of the self would emerge from these reflections. In contrast to much contemporary philosophy which suggest that to be a self is to be a self-maker, the philosophy and theology of gift proposed here would suggest that to be a self, is to be a self-giver and a receiver.

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