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**IF CREATION IS A GIFT**

**TOWARDS AN ECO/THEO/LOGICAL APORETICS**

A dissertation

presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

According to Jacques Derrida's challenging and compelling text *Given Time* (1992), the gift is a paradox or *aporia*: on the one hand, the gift is marked by gratuity or excess; on the other hand, it is constituted by circularity or exchange. I critically appropriate this insight in an eco/theo/logical direction. In my introductory chapter, the work's key concepts are defined: "creation" is figured as the matrix of *all* material things (other-than-human, human, and humanly constructed), and Derrida's aporetics of the gift is described (chapter 1). With Derrida's thinking of gifting in mind, I locate and discuss the ways in which the word "gift" appears in the Bible and in pre-twentieth century theology. Twentieth century figurations of the gift by Kenneth L. Schmitz, Stephen H. Webb, and Jean-Luc Marion are also critiqued in terms of the gift's tension (chapter 2). I then examine Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of the gift. By highlighting that which is problematical in this insightful approach to the gift, I introduce the possibility of *oscillation*: constantly moving between the gift's two basic elements, excess and exchange. I contend that an oscillating movement would respect and reflect the gift's contradictoriness (chapter 3). In the final chapter, the concept of oscillation is applied to the question of creation: if what-is is a gift, then it, too, would be marked by excess and exchange. I thereby conclude the thesis by offering an oscillating eco-*ethos* that respects and reflects the creation-gift's aporeticity. Key themes include: creation's overwhelming excess and our silence and "tremblings"; and, an oscillation between a letting-be and enjoyment with a certain utility and return (chapter 4). The aims of the thesis include: (1) to examine how thinkers have contemplated the gift, and to propose a way in which this paradox may be faithfully re-thought; and, (2) to indicate ways in which our interactions with the creation-gift would be eco/theo/logically responsible.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and affirms that to the best of the candidate's knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Name: MARK MANOLOPOULOS

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Date: 22/09/03

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I anticipated my life as a doctoral candidate would be demanding, but I never envisioned it would be so *enriching*. To be sure, the subject matter itself played a pivotal role: I was granted the privilege of carrying out a sustained reflection on a most captivating thought—the gift of creation. However, what made the experience even more enjoyable was the support I received from so many people, both inside and outside my university life.

First of all, Monash University was extremely supportive. I would like to thank the University (which I began attending as an undergraduate almost ten years ago) for a Monash Graduate Scholarship, a travel grant, and the many other kinds of assistance. I am also grateful for the assistance I received from the Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology, under the directorship of Constant Mews, as well as the backing of the Department of Historical Studies. I was also supported by three exceptional supervisors. Kate Rigby, my main supervisor, offered outstanding expertise and genuine enthusiasm. Those who know Kate are inevitably enriched by her passion for creation. My associate supervisors, Robyn Horner and Roland Boer, were, likewise, extremely generous with their guidance and encouragement. Their involvement fostered many opportunities, including the chance to travel to the United States—an incredibly rewarding experience—and I also thank the thinkers I visited who made it so.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### i. What If?

What if what-is is a gift?

Acknowledging but bracketing the originality and utility of Cartesian doubt, one thing we know with any certainty is that creation is a *given*: it is there; we belong to a matrix of beings. However, when we move from the self-evident observation “the world is a given” to the proposition “the world is a *gift*” we participate in a leap of faith. We pass over the obvious and enter the speculative. When we consider “creation-as-gift” we must be aware of the “as.” What does an awareness of the “as” entail? We need to concede and affirm that the supposition (world-as-gift) cannot be reduced to an axiom (world-as-given): the “is” and the “as” make a world of difference. We can be certain that “creation is a given” but must also acknowledge that the given world may be a gift “*only*” as a possibility. This “what if?” needs to be recognized as such—as a groundless ground. After all, can it be demonstrated—or disproved—that creation is *indeed a gift*? Neither philosophy nor science nor theology can provide convincing proof or counter-proof when faced with this proposition. It remains an open question (for the time being).<sup>1</sup>

Why must undecidability be allowed to play in the following work? As Jacques Derrida explains: “Undecidability is not indeterminacy. Undecidability is the competition between two determined possibilities or options . . .”<sup>2</sup> Commenting on this statement, John D. Caputo proposes: “Undecidability means that we are caught between a number of well determined possibilities . . . but that we have no algorithm to invoke to resolve the undecidability. It means that in order

<sup>1</sup> On an extended discussion of the question of the fragility of our suppositions (and associated issues), refer to Mark I. Wallace, *Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation* (New York: Continuum, 1996), chs. 1-3 [hereafter Wallace, *FS*].

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (New York: Routledge, 1999), 65-83, 79.

to get by we must proceed by a mix of faith, insight, instinct, and good luck . . .”<sup>3</sup> Undecidability makes room for faith: it both creates the space for faith and is displaced by it.<sup>4</sup> The undecidability in the presupposition “creation is a gift” must be foregrounded in order to ensure that the following piece of thinking remains as rigorous and honest and self-vigilant as possible.<sup>5</sup>

Without a recognition that decision takes place in a context of undecidability, this work would risk sliding into dogmatism; after all, dogmatism may be described as the ignorance or forgetfulness of undecidability. As becomes evident, the present study persistently dwells within the decision/undecidability dynamic: remaining faithful to the logic or vocabulary of the what-if and as-if, what is constantly maintained during the present study is that the decision to perceive creation as a gift occurs in the context of uncertainty. This work is therefore mediated by the possible, the undecidable, the provisional, the rhetorical, the metaphorical.<sup>6</sup> And, this study can only retain its character of a study based on the “as if” *if and only if* these traits are constantly and consistently recognized, accepted, and affirmed—otherwise speculation would feign certitude.

Now, two further assumptions drive this work: not only is creation considered a gift, but the figure of the gift is identified as an *aporia*, and, by association, creation is itself figured as an *aporia*. I discuss the question of the gift-

<sup>3</sup> John D. Caputo, “For Love of the Things Themselves: Derrida’s Hyper-Realism,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 1.3 (August 2000) <<http://www.jcrt.org/archives/01.3/caputo.shtml>>  
<sup>4</sup> August 2003 [hereafter Caputo, *FL*].

<sup>4</sup> On the role of undecidability in faith and theology, refer to my article: “When Marion’s Theology Seeks Certainty,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4.1 (December 2002) <<http://www.jcrt.org/archives/04.1/manolopoulos.shtml>> 04 August 2003 [hereafter Manolopoulos, *WMT*].

<sup>5</sup> To employ terms the ecotheologian Sallie McFague utilizes to describe her own self-reflexive book, the following work is: “a wager, proposition, or experiment to investigate.” McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 84 [hereafter McFague, *TBG*]; also refer to Jay B. McDaniel, *Earth, Sky, Gods and Mortals: Developing an Ecological Spirituality* (Mystic, CT.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1990), 49, 55 [hereafter McDaniel, *ESGM*]; also refer to Mark I. Wallace, *FS*, esp. ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> The figuration of creation as a gift is *one way* of ecologically interacting with the world. McFague makes the same point about her metaphor for creation as God’s body: her study “attempts to look at everything through one lens. . . . The model of the universe as God’s body does not see nor does it allow us to say everything.” *TBG*, vii; also refer to *TBG*, 17, 22-25.

*aporia* in due course, but begin now with a few introductory remarks regarding *aporias per se*. What is an *aporia*? The Greek word *aporos* originally meant “without passage” or “impassable, trackless”; *aporia* referred to a place or question marked by a “difficulty of passing.”<sup>7</sup> “Aporia” therefore implies an experience of impassability: that which resists passing-through, such as a puzzle or paradox. The term has taken on a specifically theoretical denotation, coming to mean “an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory.”<sup>8</sup>

An acknowledgment of the *aporia*’s impassability therefore induces a certain paralysis: how to get out? But this immobility is a good thing: “aporeticity” opens up the possibility for passage.<sup>9</sup> With specific reference to the gift, Caputo invites us “to be paralyzed by this *aporia* and then to make a move (when it is impossible).”<sup>10</sup> Robyn Horner articulates the nature of this decisive move: “An *aporia*, by definition, cannot be solved, but only resolved by a decision to act in a particular way, to act *as if* there were a way forward.”<sup>11</sup> The disjunctive nature of an *aporia* does not necessarily entail political, ethical, religious, or philosophical impasse or paralysis: this double movement—or, more accurately, *stasis*-and-movement—is

<sup>7</sup> *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* defines *aporos* as: “without passage, and so of places, impassable, trackless”; it defines *aporia* as: “of places, difficulty of passing; . . . of questions, a difficulty.” Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 92 [hereafter Liddell and Scott, *AL*].

<sup>8</sup> *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. Judy Pearsall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 77 [hereafter *NODE*]. Refer to Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); also refer to Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 7 [hereafter Horner, *RGG*].

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the current meaning of “paralysis” reverses its original Greek designation: the verb *paraluo* means: “to loose from the side, loose and take off, detach from . . . to release or set free from . . . to undo.” Liddell and Scott, *AL*, 524. “Paralysis” can therefore be a loosening *and* a hardening.

<sup>10</sup> John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 184 [hereafter Caputo, *PTJD*].

<sup>11</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 247.

akin to undecidability and decision, deconstruction and construction, uncertainty and faith, *theoria* and *praxis*.<sup>12</sup> Both impasse and passage are vital.

And so, the present work emphasizes those facets of thinking that seem to have been forgotten, denied, and even demonized by (at least) western philosophical and theological discourses: possibility, undecidability, aporeticity, and so on. In light of my emphasis on these somewhat neglected facets in mainstream philosophy and theology, doesn't a risk arise: that this aporeticity will therefore be misconstrued as "another" display of postmodern posturing or obscurantism that would effectively—and irresponsibly—downplay the ecological crisis? This risk and possibility ensues *if and only if* we assume that nuanced, provisional discourse is automatically associated with impotent thinking.

To be sure, there is always the risk of a paralyzing self-vigilance. After the development of all that is excessive or hubristic in western thought, it is little wonder that radical thinking (including phenomenology, deconstruction, mystical theology, feminism, ecology, etc.)—whose insights guide this thesis—is keen to expose the dubious developments of human reason and continually demonstrate the exaggerations, limitations, and paradoxes of thought. But one should not thereby deduce that critical and self-conscious thinking could not be constructive—or even prescriptive. What is required is the delineation of constructive paths in nuanced and cautious ways. There is no fundamental tension between a thinking that proceeds prudently and a concomitant *praxis*. A self-vigilant eco/theo/logical aporeticity is not ethico-politically ineffectual.

The requirement that the present work may contribute to a radically ecological sensibility is not only motivated by a desire for rigorous (and passionate) thinking, but equally (or perhaps primarily) by an awareness of the severe ecological violence committed by humans. The present work is not a denial (subtle or

<sup>12</sup> Refer to Jacques Derrida, "*Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)*" trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. [hereafter Derrida, SLN], in *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 35-84, 53-54 [hereafter Derrida, ON]. Also refer to Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 27-28 [hereafter Derrida, GT].

otherwise) of the ecological crisis but a passionate response to it. This aporeticity responds to the disturbing state of creation:

If today is a typical day on planet earth, we will lose 116 square miles of rainforest, or about an acre a second. We will lose another 72 square miles to encroaching deserts, the results of human mismanagement and overpopulation. We will lose 40 to 250 species, and no one knows whether the number is 40 or 250. Today the human population will increase by 250,000. And today we will add 2,700 tons of chlorofluorocarbons and 15 million tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. Tonight the earth will be a little hotter, its waters more acidic, and the fabric of life more threadbare.<sup>13</sup>

As the empirical data illustrates, the question of Earth and its deterioration has rightly become an increasingly urgent and fundamental one.<sup>14</sup> Although some academics and industrialists may attempt to ignore or downplay the crisis, it is, nevertheless, a *crisis*—perhaps *the* crisis of our time and of the time to-come.<sup>15</sup> My study attempts to contribute to an ecological "movement" (no doubt, multifarious—hence the quotation marks), whose tasks include alerting humanity to its terrible perception-and-treatment of the planet. The "why" of this project is therefore linked to a desire to contribute to this most urgent of tasks, the task of thinking and acting ecologically, of thinking and acting in ways which are more sensitive towards other-than-human others as well as human others. Hence, as "theoretical" as this text may be, it is "nevertheless" intended as an unequivocally

<sup>13</sup> David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>14</sup> For a statistical overview on the state of the Earth, refer to, e.g., *Global Environment Outlook 3: Past, Present and Future Perspectives*, eds. Robin Clarke and others (London: Earthscan Publication, 2002), produced by the United Nations Environment Programme.

<sup>15</sup> While valid in its identification of the statistical exaggeration of a number of environmental thinkers (the latter, no doubt, motivated by the noble intention of saving creation), a text like Bjørn Lomborg's attention-grabbing *The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) combines, amongst a number of things, a gross andro-anthropocentrism with a severe scientism—and is thereby terribly irresponsible.

eco-affirmative text, an intention motivated by the notion that *ortho-skepsis* leads to *ortho-praxis*.

And so, acknowledging and affirming the roles of possibility, undecidability, and aporeticity in this work, the guiding question of this study is: what would it mean if creation were a gift—or at least were perceived as such?

## ii. "Creation"

To begin with, how is the broad and complex term "creation" employed in the present context? Due to the sweeping nature of this word, the task of definition requires a particularly delicate, nuanced handling. I employ this term according to an interplay of popular and refigured meanings—meanings in the plural, for "creation" carries polyvalences and ambivalences. The word's nuances may only be brought into sharper focus as the study advances; however, a delineation of the way "creation" is re/defined in the present work is particularly useful not only for the sake of clarity, but also in terms of disclosing some of the parameters of the study. So, what is at work in the word "creation"? The term is employed here to denote (1) the dynamic, open-ended totality of (2) material things in their (3) relationality and (4) creativity. I turn to a delineation of the first three aspects to this term in the present section. The fourth characteristic (creativity), which concerns the question of *how* creation is created, is taken up in subsequent sections, for it involves an examination of the religious and theological denotations and connotations of the word "creation."

One of the definitions of "creation" in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (hereafter *OED*) is "creatures collectively."<sup>16</sup> This phrase folds two features of the word. First, it denotes creation "as a whole"—although this totality is not crudely construed here as a closed collective: "creation" is employed with a recognition of,

<sup>16</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online* [hereafter *OED*], which includes 2nd ed. 1989, ed. J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), and 3rd ed., ed. John Simpson, Oxford University Press (in progress since 2000), home page <<http://dictionary.oed.com>> 6 August 2003; to avoid repetition, I do not cite the Uniform Resource Locator (U.R.L.) for each dictionary entry.

and appreciation for, its *dynamic and open-ended* nature, marked as it is by relational and creative corporeal beings.<sup>17</sup> Second, "creation" encompasses "creatures." How are "creatures" understood here? Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of "creation" as it is defined in the present aporetics is its thoroughgoing inclusiveness: "creation" stands here for *all* corporeal "creatures" or entities. "Creation" refers to the *phusis* ("the nature, inborn quality, property or constitution") of other-than-human "Nature" (mountains, tress, etc.) and human beings, *but also* to the *techné* ("art, skill, regular method of making a thing") of *all* things.<sup>18</sup> Not only is "creation" here extended beyond elemental nature, but also beyond human culture; after all, as Alice Walker points out: "even tiny insects in the South American jungle know how to make plastic . . ."<sup>19</sup> This word therefore encompasses both the natural and the "artificial"; it includes the primordial and the manufactured. According to the present aporetics, "creatures collectively" therefore not only refers to mountains or mites, trees or cells, but also to the most "mundane" of human and other-than-human constructions: skyscrapers, chairs, plastic bags, ant-plastic, and so on.

To be sure, this radically ecological egalitarianism is initially arresting—even disturbing: if "creation" has conventionally been strictly framed in terms of *phusis*, then the present expansion of this notion will not only sound strange to our anthropocentrically accustomed ears, but also seems to entail ethical

<sup>17</sup> The process ecotheologian Jay McDaniel often utilizes the term "totality" to refer to creation in *ESGM*, e.g., 106, 120-121. Due to its negative nuances ("totality" as a closed system), I utilize the term *matrix* with its intonations of relationality and creativity: according to the *OED*, the Latin word means "womb, source" and is connected to *mater*.

<sup>18</sup> The definitions for *phusis* and *techné* are in Liddell and Scott, *AL*, 772, 702. I elaborate the ecological and ethical import of these words as I proceed.

<sup>19</sup> Alice Walker, "Everything is a Human Being," in *Living by the Word: Selected Writings 1973-1987* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 139-152, 148; cited in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), xii.

indiscriminateness (I return to this question shortly).<sup>20</sup> We may begin to familiarize ourselves with this confronting democratism by citing, among others, the incisive work of ecophilosopher Freya Mathews.<sup>21</sup> Mathews argues against any “categorical distinction” between the humanly constructed and *phusis*, and advises that we “set aside the intuitive tendency, shared by many of the ecologically minded, to see Nature as enchanted but our own handiwork as somehow intrusive and disenchanting.”<sup>22</sup> Insightfully, Mathews adds:

The meaning of the artifact is finite and transparent to us because we are its creators, but this may be too shortsighted a view. Perhaps we should not be lulled by the familiar functional face that our artifacts present to us. We may have baked the bricks and built the buildings, smelted the steel and shaped it into automobiles, but these are only transitory forms that are assumed by materials that are, after all, deeply other-than-us, materials that have alien histories in the depths of mountains or ancient forests or in the cores of blown-out stars and will have alien futures, once they have returned, as almost everything created by us does, into the ground.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Due to the limits of the thesis, I cannot elaborate on the phenomenon of “strong” anthropocentrism or “human racism”; however, its criticism and destabilization underpins the entire study. On this crucial question, refer to, e.g., Richard Routley and Val Routley, “Against the Inevitability of Human Chauvinism,” in *Ethics and Problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Kenneth E. Goodpaster and Kenneth M. Sayre (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 36-59; Robyn Eckersley, “Beyond Human Racism,” in *Environmental Values* 7 (1998): 165-82.

<sup>21</sup> Radical eco-egalitarianism marks works like Charles E. Scott’s *The Lives of Things* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) [hereafter Scott, *LT*], which cites Italo Calvino’s radically inclusive *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 124; radical inclusiveness also marks writings like Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2000), 228. And, one suspects, radical eco-egalitarianism pervades the works of many brave and thoughtful poets and artists.

<sup>22</sup> Freya Mathews, “The Soul of Things,” in *Terra Nova: Nature and Culture* 1.4 (Fall 1996): 55-64, 56 [hereafter Mathews, *ST*]. Also refer to Scott, *LT*, 34. Radical eco-egalitarianism therefore exceeds the impressive biological egalitarianism exemplified by deep ecology; refer to, e.g., Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City, UT.: Peregrine Books, 1985) [hereafter Devall and Sessions, *DE*].

<sup>23</sup> Mathews, *ST*, 56.

Radical eco-egalitarianism is crucial in terms of the way we think “creation”: for the most part, excess, mystery, reverence, and respect have been historically attached to the most “obviously” enigmatic figures—deities and angels, spirits and souls, stars and planets, natural wonders, the human being, and so on. This is not a criticism aimed solely at theology, for theology itself has, on the rare occasion, pointed towards egalitarianism in the thought of thinkers like Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) and Meister Eckhart (1260-1329). Eckhart scandalously professes: “The highest angel, the mind, and the gnat have an equal model in God.”<sup>24</sup> However, in an age of ubiquitous artifactuality, what this thesis attempts to show is that our awe and respect should be extended to *all* things—even the humanly constructed things that are usually perceived as “ordinary” or “lackluster.”

And so, the present study may be more accurately described as an *oikological* aporetics rather than an “ecological” aporetics: *oikos* refers to “home” and is here employed to extend the terms of reference of “eco” found in the stricter scientific term “ecology” which characteristically refers to the study of *biological* systems.<sup>25</sup> I therefore often write terms like “ecology,” “ecological,” and “eco/theo/logical” as “*oikology*,” “*oikological*,” and “*oiko*/theo/logical” as a way of designating the radically inclusive nature of this thesis: *all* corporeality (biotic, abiotic, “natural,” “artificial,” etc.) is enveloped (and embraced) by the category of “creation.” By evoking a radical democratism, this work emphasizes the things which have become the most disregarded, denigrated, and devastated. These include other-than-human creatures and the environment, but also those things that are produced by humans that do not normally command our awe and respect—or even our

<sup>24</sup> Meister Eckhart: *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate*, ed. and trans. Josef Quint (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1963), 148; cited in Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality In New Translation* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 98 [hereafter Fox, *Br*]. Also refer to Eckhart, “Sermon Five,” in Fox, *Br*, 91. Eckhart’s respect for the conventionally ignored or despised pre-empted Pascal’s wonder. After Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)—and discourses like quantum physics, one cannot deny the depth or mystery of the microcosmic world, though it may often be ignored or neglected; refer to Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Kralshheimer [London: Penguin Books, 1995], e.g., 60-61.

<sup>25</sup> Refer to Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 1 [hereafter Ruether, *GG*]; McDaniel, *ESGM*, 25.

attention. Indeed, we mass-manufacturers and hyper-consumers, constituents of a throw-away culture, characteristically and harmfully dispose of these things by casting them aside in overflowing landfills.

This aporetic is therefore and primarily a kind of ontic: the emphasis lies on creation's "thingness" or "whatness" rather than its "isness" or "thatness." My "indifference" to the ontological difference is driven by a focus on creation's corporeality as "opposed" to its being—an indifference which attempts to preserve the ecological imperative of the work. Furthermore, whether the bracketing of the question of being is possible and justifiable, it is certainly *necessary* in terms of the study's manageability.

An important objection arises at this point: an expansion of the terms of reference for "creation" seems to imply a denial of any ethical dimension to this aporetic: if every thing falls under the category of "creation," and if all creation-things are considered "gifts," then this aporetic would be unable to discriminate against that which is ecologically violent—for how could ecologically harmful things like plastic bags be *gifts*? To begin with (for I pursue the question of violence along another trajectory in the fourth chapter), the following clarification is articulated: a *pragma* (a thing) may be a gift (or marked by the aspect of giftness), but it is presumably *more and otherwise*.<sup>26</sup> A thing's giftness is *but one* of its many aspects. (Things, after all, elude and exceed our conceptualizations.) My contention is that humanly produced things like plastic bags, and, more poignantly, human beings themselves, are gifts—but gifts that also disfigure and/or destroy other gifts. A gift can also be destructive. This duality of the gift is itself reflected in its

<sup>26</sup> I borrow, modify, and re-write (often by necessity) a number of unusual and even neologistic terms derived from the word "gift" (and other words). The word "giftness" denotes a thing's gift-aspect. The term "gifting" signifies the act of gift-giving. ("Giving," on the other hand, is a more general term and does not necessarily refer to gift-giving.) I sometimes utilize the modified term "gift/ing" (modified by a slash) as a reminder that the gift is both a creative act and a matrix of beings. I also utilize "gift" as a verb, as in "X gifts Y to Z" or "X gift-ed Y to Z"; I hyphenate this latter term (gift-ed) to distinguish it from its conventional meaning ("gifted" = "talented"). Many of these words are not new; refer to, e.g., Webb, *TGG*.

etymology: the Greek and Latin, *dosis*, of which "dose" is derived, can mean a present, a poison, or a cure; in German, *Gift* means "poison."<sup>27</sup>

An awareness of the multiple aspects of things may also guard against any possibility that the postulation of an all-consuming "creation-ness" and giftness that marks all things erases difference.<sup>28</sup> To propose that all things are gifts does not thereby deny any individuation. *Pragmata* may share the feature of giftness, but this shared feature does not thereby preclude their differentiation. Giftness is—or may be—but one of many aspects to things.

The definition of creation as "creatures collectively" probably obscures a third crucial feature of creation: this word does not (or should not) exclusively refer to *pragmata*, but includes the *relations* between the things of creation. This aporetic acknowledges and affirms that what-is is indelibly marked by relationality. Radical discourses (process thought, phenomenology, feminism, etc.) recognize that we humans are embedded in a complex web of beings.<sup>29</sup> (Post-Newtonian science also confirms the intrinsic interconnectedness of things.)<sup>30</sup> Citing the work of Alfred North Whitehead and the theologian Charles Hartshorne, Stephen H. Webb succinctly sums up the drastic implications of relationality: "Relation, synthesis, dependence are not additions to any given entity but part of the entity from the very beginning. The idea of independent, concrete substances is an abstraction that

<sup>27</sup> Homer, *RGG*, 9-1; also refer to Derrida, *GT*, 81. The Greek *dorodokeo* means "to accept as a present, to take as a bribe." Liddell and Scott, *AL*, 187. Also refer to Émile Benveniste, "Gift and Exchange in the Indo-European Vocabulary," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward and Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), 33-42.

<sup>28</sup> This is one of Sallie McFague's concerns about the radical egalitarianism espoused by discourses like deep ecology. McFague, *TBG*, 117, 121, 125, 127-129. While McFague questions this egalitarianism, it seems she nevertheless comes close to it with her "radically inclusive" hermeneutic and Christianity's "radical inclusiveness"; refer to McFague, *TBG*, 172, 173.

<sup>29</sup> McFague cites the following "postmodern"—her term (and an appropriate one)—thinkers for their insistence on relationality and embeddedness: Alfred North Whitehead, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Caroline Whitbeck, and Donna Haraway. McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 99 [hereafter McFague, *SNC*].

<sup>30</sup> On the physical sciences' contribution to the thinking of relationality and interdependency, refer to, e.g. Ruether, *GG*, esp. 38-58, 248. (Most of the ecotheological texts referred to in the present work engage with post-Newtonian science.)

does not do justice to the complexity of reality. Novelty, relationship, and becoming are the key terms that replace the traditionally static metaphysical vocabulary of sameness, substance, and being.<sup>31</sup> While the present aporetic applauds the espousal of dependence and becoming, it prefers—for reasons that become clearer as I proceed—to maintain a certain tension between these two logics, rather than perform a (somewhat justified) replacement or inversion. Creation be/comes.

And so, “creation” signifies here (1) the material totality or matrix of (2) material things in all their (paradoxical) independence and (3) relationality.

### iii. From What/Whom (Else)?

A fourth designation of “creation” refers to the creative act: As the *OED* notes, the term also refers to “The action or process of creating . . .” “Creation” signifies not only the dynamic totality-of-things but also this matrix’s makings: “creation” is becoming, process. Creation creates. Catherine Keller notes that “The term ‘creation’ has the advantage of emphasizing the creative novelty, the mysterious event-character, of what comes to be . . .”<sup>32</sup> Creation’s creativity is signified in the Greek term *poiēsis*, which denotes bringing-forth or coming-into-presence.<sup>33</sup> “Creation” can therefore refer to the creative actions of human and other-than-human creation.<sup>34</sup> As part of material creation, humans create creations. Hence, cultural products and artifacts fall under the rubric of “creation.” (This

<sup>31</sup> Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 105 [hereafter Webb, *TGG*].

<sup>32</sup> Keller adds: “Thus we cannot simply exchange it [the word “creation”] for ‘universe,’ ‘cosmos,’ or ‘nature.’” Keller, *FD*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Poiēsis* means “a making: a forming, creating” (and it also denotes “the art of poetry”), while *autopoiēsis* means “self-produced.” Liddell and Scott, *AL*, 568, 117. The terms “*poiēsis*” and “*autopoiēsis*” are utilized in a variety of discourses, from Heideggerian to scientific.

<sup>34</sup> As one of the meanings of “creation,” the *OED* includes the following definition: “An original production of human intelligence or power; especially of imagination or imaginative art.” Of course, such creativity activity exceeds human activity.

accords with the promotion of the egalitarianism of the present work.) It is equally vital to emphasize that other-than-human others also create—such as the plastic-creating ants.

Heeding the insights of discourses advancing flux, becoming, and process (Heraclitean, Goethean, Hegelian, Schellingian, Nietzschean, Whiteheadian, etc.—not to mention post-Newtonian science), I acknowledge and affirm the dynamic, creative aspect to what-is.<sup>35</sup> The term “creation” therefore denotes both creation-things and creation-acts; “creation” does not simply refer here to what-is, but also to its ongoing creativity.

Now, the notion of creativity raises a number of broad, complex, and correlated issues. The most immediately relevant problem may be framed as a question: I remarked above that creation creates, but does it create *autopoietically* (self-creatively)—or are there other co-creators?

Perhaps the best way to broach this issue is to enact a kind of *suspension*: to suspend, on the one hand, is to “temporarily prevent from continuing or being in force or effect” and, on the other, is “to hang (something) from somewhere.”<sup>36</sup> Suspension is therefore a double movement; it keeps undecidability open. But why is there a need for openness in relation to the question of the “who and how” of creativity? As I explain below, this requirement for openness proves to be methodologically, ecumenically, and ecologically necessary and beneficial.

While creation certainly creates itself, the proposition that there are no other possible co-creative forces or agencies at play would deny the undecidable nature of the act of material creativity. In other words, a pure and simple *autopoiesis* denies the

<sup>35</sup> On some of the abovementioned thinkers, refer to, e.g., Heraclitus, *Fragments*, trans. and commentary T. M. Robinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1979); Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968) [hereafter Nietzsche, *WP*]. A classic scientific text is Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984).

<sup>36</sup> “Suspension” also denotes “the system of springs and shock absorbers by which a vehicle is supported on its wheels. *NODE*, 1869.

possibility of *co*-creativity. I affirm the proposition that creation itself should be identified as self-creative, although I *also* leave open the question regarding whether what-is creates exclusively *autopoietically* or otherwise. This openness may be expressed grammatically as "*auto/poiesis*": the forward slash disturbs the idea of a purely independent arising.

And so, with this dual-action suspension in mind, I am now able to approach the question of the religious resonance of "creation." The *OED* states that one of the meanings of this term denotes both divine activity and the object of this productivity: "the action of bringing" or "calling into existence of the world" "by divine power," and "creation" is "That which God has created . . ." This definition confirms the notion that the word "creation" inscribes what-is in terms of divine creativity. Obviously, "creation" implies divine creation but this implication is heavily qualified in the context of this aporetic. How so?

The insistence on undecidability in this study entails that the question of divine creativity remains as open as possible. What this means in terms of the question of a divine "who-how" of creativity is that the identity of a possible co-creator remains undecidable: this co-creator (or co-creators) need not correlate in any exclusive sense with the faith of any identifiable religion—especially the determinate monotheisms. One could assume a number of alternative positions: for example, that what-is is created polytheistically, or arises out of a chaotic abyss, or emerges *autopoietically*, or expands and contracts eternally, and so on. All of these alternatives are registered here as *legitimate possibilities*, for the question of creation's emergence—like the question of the giftness of creation—is an open one; the question of the "from what/who" remains undecidable. Hence, the allusion to deity in the word "creation" needs to be read here *as an allusion to a possibility*—nothing more and nothing less.

But should a study that acknowledges and affirms its status as the exploration of a possibility (creation-as-gift), employ a loaded and therefore possibly non-inclusive term like "creation," especially when "creation" implies a "doubled assumption": that the creation-gift (first assumption) is co-created by a Creator—

God (second assumption)? In other words, does the employment of a theologically charged word disclose a certain inclination—a certain religious or theological bias? Yes, but one may inscribe this inclination or bias within the logic of the "as if" that informs this meditation. The utilization of the term "creation" indicates an explicit recognition of, and openness to, the possibility that divinity plays a role in corporeal creativity. The potential of this possibility should not be diluted by refusing to engage this word or by exclusively drawing on alternative, less theologically sonorous terms (like "cosmos" or "universe"). *However and at the same time*, an unqualified use of the term "creation" would perhaps betray a desire to transform the possibility (creation-may-be-gift) into a dogmatic assumption (creation-is-gift); hence, the urgency to suspend and reconfigure certain aspects of the word "creation."

Now, a certain dual suspension proves fortuitous and necessary not only methodologically but also ecumenically and ecologically. A particular kind of bracketing of the question of co-creator/s opens onto a radical ecumenism. If the anonymity of creation's co-creator/s is taken seriously, then a radical opening ensues in terms of *ecumenism*—and not just in terms of dialogue between Christian churches, or between Christianity and other monotheisms, or between monotheisms and other religions: *oikoumene*, after all, signifies "the inhabited globe."<sup>37</sup> If believers were to acknowledge that divinity (YHWH, the Trinity, Allah, etc.) is ultimately marked by an irreducible undecidability, then the question of divine identity would be recognized as ultimately undecidable—as a matter of *faith*. Incapable of being settled in any definitive sense, the nature/s of deity remains an open question (for the time being).<sup>38</sup> By keeping the question of who/what open, this aporetic suspends the differences associated with divisive identifications.

<sup>37</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1985), xiv [hereafter Moltmann, *GC*].

<sup>38</sup> As a Christian process ecotheologian, McDaniel "nevertheless" keeps open the possibility of polytheism: "Those who travel the ecological path can, if they choose, believe in the ontological reality of gods and goddesses, all the while remaining Christian, or they can remain, as I do, undecided." *ESGM*, 145.

Indeed, one may suggest that negative or mystical theology approaches this kind of radical suspension: as Jean-Luc Marion explains, this remarkable body of discourse pursues a path of “unknowing,” “incomprehension,” “de-nomination,” and divine “anonymity.”<sup>39</sup> As Robyn Horner rightly describes it, negative theology “works aporetically,” and so mysticism and the present work certainly share common ground.<sup>40</sup> However, even this kind of cutting-edge theological discourse (perhaps coerced by orthodoxy?) seems to succumb to a certain dogmatics—a movement contrary to this aporetics.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the suspension of the question of the identity of the gift-giver in the present work may therefore be understood as a radicalization of mystical theology: this aporetics (which is not, after all, a theology) emphatically plays with the anonymity and undecidability of the gift-giver—to the extent that there may be no giver at all. Even when the present aporetics offers a name for a co-creator (the God of the Bible) this name ultimately remains structurally unnecessary. The thesis proceeds according to the supposition that *material creation* is a gift: an inquiry into *who gifts—and how* remains somewhat peripheral.

One also finds religious thinkers who implicitly or explicitly (and in different ways) bracket the question of the “how” of creativity. According to theologian Kenneth L. Schmitz, the fourth century Christian thinker Lactantius “protests that the failure to comprehend the way in which creation has come about is no good

<sup>39</sup> These terms are employed by Marion (and first of all by the mystical theologians he refers to) throughout the essay “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ‘Negative Theology,’” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20-53 [hereafter Marion, *IN*]. Marion also explains that “mystical theology” is a more suitable term than “negative theology.” *IN*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 232. (Horner refers to “mystical theology” as “negative theology” in this context.) Horner adds: “The event to which it [negative/mystical theology] bears witness (is) impossible, unknowable, an *aporia*.”

<sup>41</sup> This is apparently the case with the otherwise remarkable Nicholas of Cusa (1400-1464). Marion describes—quite approvingly, it seems—the structure of Nicholas’s *De docta ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*), wherein this possibility materializes: “The path is thus cleared for thought of the incomprehensible as such (Book II), opening onto a *complete dogmatic theology* (Book III).” Marion, *IN*, 25. I suspect that this kind of “opening” would close the essential openness of an *eco/theo/logical* aporetics.

reason for denying the fact that it has.”<sup>42</sup> Schmitz himself, who argues for creation *ex nihilo* (discussed shortly), admits: “Theoretically, an appeal to God is not needed in order to explain things . . .”<sup>43</sup> Marginalizing the question of the how (and why) of creativity is also proposed by Sallie McFague: “A spirit theology focuses attention not on how and why creation occurred either in the beginning or the evolutionary aeons of time, but on the rich variety of living forms that have been and are *now* present on our planet.”<sup>44</sup> And, finally, writing as a phenomenologist, Marion is also keen to preserve the anonymity of the gift-giver (refer to chapter 3). The present thesis shares this desire to keep the question of the (co-) gift-giver as open as possible, and to focus on the gift itself—creation.

What is the relation between maintaining the undecidability and openness of the question of the how-of-creation and the question of atheism? By maintaining the anonymity of the gift-giver, this study keeps open the possibility of atheism: atheism is recognized as a legitimate possibility with regard to the gift-giving who/what, since the giver (if any) *may not* be a deity. However, *dogmatic* atheism closes the openness of this question in its denial of the possibility of a gift-giving deity. This aporetics opposes such closure. An atheism open to the question of the what/who, and open to the figuration of creation as a gift, would acquiesce with this aporetics. Even agnosticism (which is, by definition, open-minded) is certainly amenable here: the only essential assumption required is that creation is considered a gift. My work is therefore open to the possibility of reaching every kind of believer and unbeliever—and, in Mark C. Taylor’s words, to those “between belief and unbelief.”<sup>45</sup> This radically ecumenical aporetics embraces open-minded believers, atheists, and “inbetweeners.”

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982), 20 [hereafter Schmitz, *TGC*]. The author refers to Lactantius’ *Divine Institutes*, Bk. II, ch. 9. Lactantius writes about creation, but does not conceive it in terms of gift.

<sup>43</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> McFague, *TBG*, 145.

<sup>45</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5 [hereafter Taylor, *Er*]; also refer to Wallace, who recalls a biblical instance of un/belief (Mk 9.24), *FS*, 16.

A certain "in-difference" to the question of the identity of the gift-giver is ecologically fortuitous, for the crux of the study lies with the gift itself (creation). By keeping the question of who/what as open as possible, I am thereby able to devote more time to the question of the gift *per se*. If the essential assumption of the thesis is that *creation* is perceived as a gift, I am better able to focus on the *oikos* rather than the *theos*. By emphasizing the anonymity of the giver, the way is paved for ecological thought. Treating the question of gift-giver/s in any in-depth way would necessarily subtract from the focus of the study. In theology and philosophy, not enough time and attention has been paid to the corporeal: my work is guided by the need to redress this imbalance. Hence, the ruling question here is "what if *what-is* is a gift?" rather than "what/who is the giver who gifts?" My immediate concern is *the gift itself*.

#### iv. Revisiting Divine Creativity

Remaining faithful to this dual suspension, I now turn to a relatively brief examination of the layers of theological meaning that have accrued in this word "creation" and its requisite re-inscription in light of the present aporetics. The term certainly registers a number of suspect construals of divine creativity. It is therefore necessary to examine the religious nuances of this term, for, without its rethinking, these questionable aspects will be carried with the term in the ensuing meditation.

Theology typically (though not exclusively) defines deity as an omnipotent Creator-God, and the "how" of creation is characterized by orthodoxy in terms of the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*: that God creates the world in an absolute sense; in other words, before the divine creative-act there is absolutely nothing.<sup>46</sup> This apparently post-scriptural axiom has been increasingly questioned by a number of

<sup>46</sup> On the stereotypes identified with the notion of "Creator," refer to, e.g., Keller, *FD*, 6, McDaniel, *ESGM*, 138.

biblical exegetes and theologians.<sup>47</sup> Schmitz concedes that "most Biblical scholars are more reserved" when it comes to reading the Genesis account as "the explicit affirmation of creation from nothing"; indeed, after a very brief perusal of the biblical text, Schmitz agrees that "the explicit doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is *not* to be claimed for the cosmogony set forth in *Genesis* . . ."<sup>48</sup>

The most recent and devastating critique of this doctrine is undertaken by Keller in *Face of the Deep*, with its passionate commitment to Genesis 1.2: "the earth was a formless void (*tohu va bohu*) and darkness covered the face of the deep (*tehom*), while a wind from God (*ruach elohim*) swept over the face of the waters." Keller convincingly argues that Genesis 1.2 portrays biblical creation as an interplay between *ruach* and the chaotic, primordial *tehom* rather than a unilateral action by an omnipotent Creator.<sup>49</sup>

A brief discussion of Genesis 1 will support the proposition that biblical creation seems to be *co*-creation. The creation-act involves a multiplicity of movements: (1) there is a play between divine spirit and the abyss (Gen 1.2); (2) *Elohim* beckons a letting-be (Gen 1.3)—which is perhaps a "solicitation" rather than a command; and, (3) this co-creation is marked by dispersal and difference (Gen. 1.4f).<sup>50</sup> The creative act of Genesis 1 is therefore manifold: it is interactive, a seductive open-invitation, and disseminative. Co-creation is irreducible to one kind of event; it stresses interrelation between deity and primordial materiality, a calling-

<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the definitive study of "creation from nothing" is Gerhard May's *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation Out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 15; 16, second emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> Refer to Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003) [hereafter Keller, *FD*]. "*Tehom*" is, by definition, difficult to describe or even allegorize. Having nuanced her metaphors, the following list is composed: "dimensionality, womb; *complicatio*, *differance*, *kehora*, no/thing and in/finite; milieu of milieus, where what will be, is becoming . . ." *FD*, 213. However, the *tehom* should be differentiated from deity; as Keller explains, the deep is the "en" in the *pan-en-theo*. *FD*, 219, 227.

<sup>50</sup> Keller proposes that the divine call may be a "seduction" or "a whisper of desire." Keller, *FD*, 115, 116. McDaniel proffers: "God has created and continues to create the world through persuasion rather than coercion, evocation rather than manipulation, invitation rather than compulsion." McDaniel, *ESGM*, 98.

forth which is a letting-be, and a multiplying individuation.<sup>51</sup> And so, all these aspects to "creation" seem to confound and exceed any simple and conventional notion of material creation as an absolute *origination* from an all-powerful deity. Karen Baker-Fletcher concludes: "According to Genesis, then, the deep, the darkness, the waters dance in cocreative activity with God."<sup>52</sup>

However, creation-from-nothing should not be discounted outright—despite its dubious elements. Keller herself admits to the possibility that *tehom* itself may be divinely created.<sup>53</sup> And so, Scripture *itself* leaves open the possibility of a divine creation from nothing. The current aporetics respects and reflects scriptural undecidability (and, of course, exceeds it by keeping other-than-biblical possibilities open). Hence, the present study makes room for the contradictory variety of *all* of these figurings of divine creation—as perplexing as this co-habitation appears. The mutually exclusive promotion of one or the other denies the possibility of co-creation, which is a possibility maintained by the present aporetics. An unwavering recognition of the undecidability or play between the two basic positions, pure *autopoiesis* and *creatio ex nihilo*, may be expressed by adding the prefix "co" (once again, with the indispensable forward slash) to verbs like "created" (co/created) and "gift-ed" (co/gift-ed).

There are further reasons for the retention of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* as a possibility. The retention of the possibility of *creatio ex nihilo* may be understood as a certain kind of recognition that the doctrine perhaps arises with the best of

<sup>51</sup> The multiple creative-acts of the Bible—interaction, dlocution, letting-be, dissemination—would ostensibly be *otherwise* than how we humans could think such events, for, by definition, they exceed the human capacity to think them. In other words, divine co-creation would exceed human comprehension. Moltmann contends: "Because God's creative activity has no analogy, it is also unimaginable." Moltmann, *GC*, 73; also refer to Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 105 [hereafter Marion, *GWB*]. (Originally published as *Dieu sans l'être. Hors-texte* [Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982].)

<sup>52</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998), 24; cited in Keller, *FD*, 240, n. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Keller, *FD*, 46. An attentive thinker like Keller does not simplistically propose the "demolition" of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* but argues for this dominant notion's "destabilization." Keller, *FD*, 6. Strategies that contribute to "the destabilization of founding certainties" are certainly welcomed by this aporetics.

ecological intentions: citing the work of Paul Santmire, Keller explains that Irenaeus (120-202 C.E.) defends this teaching as a challenge against flagrantly anti-ecological gnosticism.<sup>54</sup> The notion of creation from nothing is *meant* to safeguard the intrinsic goodness of matter—even though it also and primarily marginalizes the *tehom*.

Having affirmed the retention of the multiple, divergent modes of creation (including creation from nothing), one must nevertheless register the significance of those modes which have been traditionally ignored, marginalized, or hereticized (interaction, communication, letting-be). Furthermore, as Keller's work demonstrates, these characterizations of the creation-act offer incisively *oikological* ways of interpreting, and interacting with, the world.

So far I have examined the way in which the "how" of creation has been depicted theologically. How does theology construe the "what" of divine creation? In the context of an "all-powerful" God who creates from nothing, "creation" is conventionally construed as a piece of "handiwork" (Ps 19.1) single-handedly produced by this Creator. Schmitz correctly identifies that "an absolutely all-powerful God, creator *ex nihilo*, seems utterly outmoded" but then, somewhat unenthusiastically, asks whether a finite or processual God, "in mutual interaction with creatures, giving but also receiving from them" is the only other option.<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, Schmitz does not pursue this possibility, for, when construed in terms of *ex nihilo*, "creation" can imply a kind of entirely completed and essentialized object, thereby restricting it as a temporal, processual, and restless manifold of beings.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Keller, *FD*, 50; refer to Santmire, *TN*, 43. Keller prudently advises that the ecologically bivalent character of creation from nothing "would mean learning to distinguish the matter-affirming intention of the *ex nihilo* from its own matter-nihilating dualism." *FD*, 50. With regard to the citation of chronological information pertaining to pre-twentieth century theological figures, I provide approximate dates; furthermore, the appellation "Common Era" is unnecessary, as all the relevant figures cited arise during this period.

<sup>55</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 66.

<sup>56</sup> McFague cites Elizabeth Grosz's definition of "essentialism": "Essentialism . . . refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions which limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization . . ." Grosz, "Conclusion: A Note on Essentialism and Difference," in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, ed. Sneja Gunew (New York: Routledge, 1990, 332-344, 334; cited in McFague, *JNC*, 181, n. 26.

The notion of a static creation is implied in Genesis itself: "And on the seventh day God *finished* the work that he [sic] had done . . ." (Gen 2.2; emphasis added)<sup>57</sup> McFague reads the characteristics of artifactness and completeness in the Genesis story: *Elohim* creates the creation-artifact in "six days" and rests on the "seventh."<sup>58</sup> The literal or metaphoricity of this narrative matters little here; of import is the story's *vocabulary of completion*: creation seems to lack autonomy and process. However, discourses have arisen (philosophies of becoming, process thought, etc.) that displace received notions of a static creation.

The idea of creation as a completed object by a divine overlord authorizes a more dubious one: that the other-than-human world is given—perhaps as a gift—to humans.<sup>59</sup> Again, biblical passages like Genesis 1.26-28 (human dominion over creation) and Genesis 9 (the covenant with Noah) promote or easily lend themselves to the anthropocentric notion that other-than-human creation is *for humans*—both in terms of an instrumentalism and domination.<sup>60</sup> With instrumentalism, a *pragma* is fundamentally or exclusively construed as a thing of use or benefit to the human agent—a mere instrument. Instrumentalism forms part of an interconnected network of hierarchical-dualistic thinking in which the other is reduced to a means for human ends.<sup>61</sup> In the incisive words of Martin Heidegger: "the impression comes to prevail that everything man [sic] encounters exists only

<sup>57</sup> I apply the following practice when dealing with exclusive language: I note it on each occasion it appears in a new section or sub-section, by citing "sic" in square brackets, but this notation does not occur constantly. (The same applies for the notes.) Highlighting sexist script is imperative: exclusivist grammar symbolizes and re-presents the violence of conceptual and political exclusion. However, the process of *periodically* underlining this objectionable language aims at recognizing and exposing this violence without becoming *unbearably* repetitive.

<sup>58</sup> Refer to McFague, *TBG*, 105 (creation as "static"), 152 (creation as "artifact").

<sup>59</sup> On the notion of God as an overlord, refer to, e.g., McDaniel, *ESGM*, 138.

<sup>60</sup> Also refer to, e.g., Ps 8.6-8.

<sup>61</sup> Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 141. On the crucial features of this deficient rationality, also refer to Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 41f [hereafter Plumwood, *FMN*].

insofar as it is his own construct."<sup>62</sup> Domination, which may be understood as an extreme form of instrumentalism, appears to be sanctioned by the call in Genesis for human "dominion" over creation.<sup>63</sup>

Theological traditions are certainly marked by ecologically crippling instrumentalism and domination. The following example from *The Spiritual Exercises* by Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) illustrates the point:

Man [sic] is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created. From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it. For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it . . ."<sup>64</sup>

Ecotheologian Matthew Fox declares (with much warrant): "Creation-centered spirituality, the spiritual tradition that is the most Jewish, most biblical, the most prophetic, and the most like the kind Jesus of Nazareth preached and lived, has been almost lost in the West. . . . [W]e have often been fed introverted, anti-artistic, anti-intellectual, apolitical, sentimental, dualistic, ascetic, and in many ways

<sup>62</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. and intro. William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 3-35, 27 [hereafter Heidegger, *QCT*]. In this essay (which I return to below), Heidegger alerts us to the fact that technology is an *instrumentum*, a "contivance" or, in comparable terms (according to the translator William Lovitt), an "arrangement, adjustment, furnishing, or equipment." *QCT*, 5, n.3.

<sup>63</sup> Refer to Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *Science* 155 [1967]: 1203-07; also refer to, e.g., McFague, *JNC*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, "First Week: Principle and Foundation" <<http://www.ccel.org/i/ignatius/exercises/cache/exercises.pdf>> 7 August 2003. Throughout this thesis, I often utilize the excellent and extensive resources of the *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* website, dir. Harry Plantinga, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan <[www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)> [hereafter *CCEL*], as well as other websites. Editorial information is provided whenever available. Since many of the translations are archaic, I occasionally modify some passages (e.g., from "saith" to "say"). The websites do not provide page numbers, but other reference markers are supplied. I also cite the texts' U.R.Ls and the most recent access dates. All emphases located in citations from websites are added, unless otherwise stated.

masochistic spirituality parading as Christian spirituality.<sup>65</sup> To be sure, the relation between Christianity and human domination over creation is a complex one.<sup>66</sup> I would argue that this relation is double-sided: Christian churches, and, in particular, dominant theological discourses, have contributed to the crisis; *however*, Christianity can also help in the fight against eco-degradation and contribute to the rise of *oikological* consciousness.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, added to biblical and theological traditions determining "creation" as an artifact to-be-used are various modern-scientific worldviews treating the other-than-human world as artifact, object, or experiment.<sup>68</sup> Bruce V. Foltz summarizes this "double de-naturing" of creation from a Heideggerian perspective:

The first denaturing occurred through Christianity, whereby nature was 'degraded' to the status of *ens creatum* [created things], to being the effect of a first, self-caused cause and thus placed beneath the supernatural. The second and decisive denaturing, however, was brought about by modern natural science, which 'dissolved nature into the orbit of the

<sup>65</sup> Fox, Br, 4.

<sup>66</sup> An excellent treatment of this question is H. Paul Santmire's *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) [hereafter Santmire, TN]. For an incisive ecofeminist critique of Christianity and its involvement in patriarchal domination, refer to Ruether, GG; also refer to her powerful summary critique, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2000) [hereafter Hessel and Ruether, CE], 97-112.

<sup>67</sup> Moltmann notes that theology and science also instrumentalize (and inferiorize) the human body in terms of the soul, reason, or will. Moltmann, GC, 245f. Also refer to Steven Bouma-Prediger, *The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jürgen Moltmann* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), ch. 1. (The least known of these three important thinkers is Joseph Sittler, an ecotheological pioneer, and Bouma-Prediger is commended for bringing Sittler to one's attention. Bouma-Prediger also cites another little-known ecotheological visionary, Conrad Bonifazi, who refers to Continental philosophy, perhaps somewhat patchily, in his nevertheless interesting *A Theology of Things* [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1967].) Also refer to, e.g., Max Oelschlaeger, *Caring for Creation: An Ecumenical Approach to the Environmental Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) [hereafter Oelschlaeger, CC].

<sup>68</sup> Refer to Carolyn Merchant's important work: *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

mathematical order of world-commerce, industrialization, and in a particular sense, machine-technology.<sup>69</sup>

To be sure, ecological living does not entail an absolute refusal of instrumentality. One of the foremost critics of instrumentalism, ecophilosopher Val Plumwood, urges a moderate course of action, where consideration of the Other mediates utility: "What is required is that one be concerned with others [human and non-human] for their own sake and that one's ends make ineliminable reference to the ends of others, not that they be totally free of self"; we should "take account of the interests or well-being of other species for their own sake."<sup>70</sup> Without this crucial consideration of the Other, instrumentalism, combined with a complex range of interrelated cultural factors, undoubtedly fosters and exacerbates *oikological* violence.<sup>71</sup>

And so, if "creation" connotes the completed, static, instrumentalized, and violated handiwork of a creator who creates from nothing, why employ this term in the current work? Part of the task of rethinking our perception of creation involves a refiguration of the word "creation." The word also provides certain advantages, particularly in terms of its expanse. Furthermore, this aporetic has a theological component, and the utilization of this word registers this element. Finally, "creation" is a word we have been gift-ed with: we begin (again) from wherever we are. There is the hope that the word's embeddedness in this *oiko/theo/logical* aporetic is transformed by it: by figuring every *pragma*-in-relation as a gift, the

<sup>69</sup> Bruce V. Foltz, *Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics, and the Metaphysics of Nature* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), 64 [hereafter Foltz, ITE]. Foltz cites Heidegger's lectures on Hölderlin's Hymns "Germanien" and "Der Rhein"; refer to Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 39, *Hölderlins Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"*, ed. Susanne Ziegler (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1980), 259-260. As my fellow student Garry J. Devereil reminded me, this "de-naturing" precedes Christianity, particularly in the form of Hellenistic philosophy.

<sup>70</sup> Val Plumwood, FMN, 151, 212-213, n.7.

<sup>71</sup> The qualifier "combined with a complex set of interrelated cultural factors" is a necessary qualification: the assumption or proposition that a *specific factor or current* is the sole or even dominant cause of the current ecological crisis is obviously reductive and simplistic. *Nevertheless*, the difficulty of the question does not entail its refusal, but a call to vigilance: to approach the question *carefully* and to offer solutions *tentatively*. I broach the question of violence in § 4.2.1.

present contemplation attempts to contribute to the emasculation of instrumentalism and domination. And so, this wor(l)d may be deformed and reformed—transfigured. Wor(l)ds are, after all, open to change.

### v. Suspending Grace

An attentiveness to materiality, combined with an insistence on keeping the question of the gift-giver as open as possible, entails a bracketing of—or only oblique encounters with—complex theological issues like non-corporeal gifts.<sup>72</sup> The indefinite article “a” in the title of this work, “If Creation is a Gift,” recognizes that material creation is one of many possible gifts. I have already stressed that this study focuses on the material world; but this focus is not a disguised inversion of the this-world/other-world(s) binary. After all, one should not be so presumptuous as to insist that the material world is “all that is.” Such an insistence disguises an excessive empiricism, an excessive materialism. Today, we should not hierarchically privilege the visible and the actual over the invisible and the possible. However, my *focus* is on the material world. I therefore limit this study to a particular kind of gift—as encompassing as this gift (creation) appears to be. “Creation” is possibly one kind of gift. We cannot know whether it is the *only* gift. Hence, I reserve (rather than reverse or invert) the question of the materially invisible and the supernatural.

This reservation towards other-than-corporeal gifts, combined with an openness towards the question of the identity of a cosmic gift-giver, contributes to the scant attention I pay to the question of grace in this work. But there are further reasons for this suspension, and their elaboration will further elucidate the nature of this aporetic. To begin with, this study turns on the notion that creation is ultimately mysterious; it ultimately exceeds human comprehension. The insistence on creation’s mysteriousness doesn’t (and shouldn’t) need to depend on another mystery (in this case, grace)—be it “prior” or “privileged.” I argue that creation

<sup>72</sup> Of course, a deferral of certain questions does not exclude the possibility that these questions nevertheless and at the same time play along the margins of the discourse.

eludes human mastery *regardless* of its status as graced or graceless. What-is does not require grace to amplify its mystery: the world is irreducibly perplexing *as it is*. Recalling grace risks blurring this insight. If the world is gift, then it follows that this gift needs to be respected, cherished, held in awe—“irrespective” of whether it is graced or ungraced. I therefore attempt to contribute to the depiction of creation as a thing of mystery or excess via recourse to its possible giftness—rather than its possible graceness.

It should also be mentioned that, according to the task of emphasizing the excess of what-is, I bracket other ways creation is re-imbued with excess—such as its sacramentality. To be sure, a subject like the Eucharistic bread and wine has become a powerful resource for post-metaphysical theology.<sup>73</sup> However, taking up this kind of reconfiguration potentially obscures what is at stake here: these things are not prized or privileged in the present context due to their transubstantiation, transignification, or transfinalization.<sup>74</sup> To be sure, I do *not* deny the possibility that other-than-material aspects mark the thing itself. However, in the context of this *oiko*-aporetic, I focus on what it may mean for things-in-relation, such as bread and wine, to be perceived as gifts to their selves and to other creatures.

I undertake this study very much interested in how Scripture inscribes the gift. My measured affinity with the Bible registers in a number of ways in relation to bracketing the question of the grace-gift. First (and most basically), biblical statements seem to authorize the distinction between creation and grace: grace is differentiated from nature by biblical authors. (Indeed, as the biblical survey in the following chapter illustrates, the grace-gift surpasses other gifts, particularly in

<sup>73</sup> Refer to Marion, *GIWB*, 139-160; Louis Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine M. Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995); McDaniel, *ESGM*, 181-182; Wallace, *FS*, 143-144, 157-158. Also refer to McDaniel, *ESGM*, 181-182; Wallace, *FS*, 143-144, 157-158.

<sup>74</sup> Refer to McFague’s discussion on the “utilitarian” aspect to Christian sacramentalism in *TBG*, 183f. Qualifying her remarks and nevertheless admiring the figures she names, McFague argues that “The great theologians and poets of the Christian sacramental tradition, including Paul, John, Irenaeus, Augustine, the medieval mystics (such as Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen), Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, love the things of the world principally as expressions of divine beauty, sustenance, truth, and glory.” *TBG*, 184.

terms of its radical gratuity.) What needs to be underlined here is that scriptural differentiation sanctions the nature/grace distinction. Since the Bible distinguishes between gifts, the bracketing of one kind of gift (that is, grace) seems tenable.

A second scripturally informed reason for deferring the question of grace is this: the biblical references to grace are deeply perplexing—perhaps more so than the vexing problem of the Bible's multifarious material gifts (chapter 2). Biblical authors do not analyze or interpret the grace-gift. Paul explicitly describes this kind of gift as *indescribable*: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (1 Cor 9.15) One question that leads on from the notion of grace's indescribability is whether one should nevertheless attempt to describe it. I pay heed to Paul's evaluation and, considered together with other arguments presented here, thereby suspend the question of grace. After all, the question of the gift-aporia is overwhelming enough: to add the possibility and mystery of grace to this question would be to compound it considerably.

Furthermore, grace's indescribability may be extended to include the *relation* between grace and other-than-human nature. In other words, the question of grace is further complicated by the scriptural silence on the *relation* between creation and grace. One effect of the absence of explanation has been a hesitation on the part of commentators to elaborate on the nature-grace dynamic.<sup>75</sup> It is difficult enough to reflect on the "obvious" (creation) without hypothesizing about other mysteries *and their relations with each other*.<sup>76</sup>

A more pressing reason for deferring the question of the grace-gift is that it is overwhelmingly associated with the salvation of human beings. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, for example, defines the term in this way: "Grace (*gratia*, *Charis*), in general, is a supernatural gift of God to intellectual creatures (men [sic], angels) for

<sup>75</sup> Stephen J. Duffy notes that Protestant thinkers "were impressed by the reticence of the Scriptures on this issue [the nature/grace correlation]." Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 79 [hereafter Duffy, TGH].

<sup>76</sup> Refer to Duffy, TGH, 116-117, 165.

their eternal salvation . . ."<sup>77</sup> Christian thinkers have made explicit the idea that the creation-gift is a secondary gift, that is, that supernatural gifts are superior to corporeal gifts. The German mystic John Tauler (1300-1361) proclaims:

Even the smallest drop of grace is better than all earthly riches that are beneath the sun. Yes, a drop of grace is more noble than all angels and all souls, and all the natural things that God has made. And yet grace is given more richly by God to the soul than any earthly gift. It is given more richly than brooks of water, than the breath of the air, than the brightness of the sun; for spiritual things are far finer and nobler than earthly things.<sup>78</sup>

This kind of hierarchization of gifts is unacceptable from an *oiko/theo*/logical perspective—although it is important to note that this bifurcation necessarily denies the richness and nobility of the ecological. Nevertheless, the "brooks of water," the "breath of the air," and the "brightness of the sun" are here considered inferior to grace.

Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) offers a similar sentiment when he professes: "Your Lord never thought this world's vain painted glory a gift worthy of you; and therefore would not bestow it on you, because He is to propane [to present/gift] you with a better portion. Let the movable go; the inheritance is yours."<sup>79</sup> This kind of thinking does not belong exclusively to pre-twentieth century (or "archival") theology.<sup>80</sup> Like Tauler and Rutherford, the Catholic theologian Stephen J. Duffy

<sup>77</sup> J. Pohle, "Grace," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1999 online edition, reproduced on the *New Advent* website, dir. Kevin Knight, New Advent Catholic Supersite, Lakewood, Colorado [hereafter *NA*] <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06701a.htm>> 5 September 2003.

<sup>78</sup> John Tauler, "The Efficacy of Divine Grace," in *Light, Life, and Love: Selections from the German Mystics of the Middle Ages*, ed. W. R. Inge, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/i/inge/light/light.rtf>> 31 August 2003.

<sup>79</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *A Selection from his Letters*, "Letter Ten," on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/r/rutherford/letters/letters.txt>> 31 August 2003.

<sup>80</sup> I sometimes refer to the grouping "pre-twentieth century theology" as "archival theology." The latter phrase is not intended as a derogatory term, but is utilized as an economical substitute for the more laborious phrase "pre-twentieth century theology."

argues for the primacy of grace: "Nature exists for grace; not vice versa."<sup>81</sup> According to this logic, the world and what is in it is severely instrumentalized: valued because it is made-for-something; creation exists *for something else*.

Duffy hierarchically bifurcates gifts: he asserts humanity's "elevation" when related to grace.<sup>82</sup> This kind of prioritization belongs, in the final analysis, to a kind of thinking that degrades the corporeal and thereby opens up the possibility of anti-ecological *praxis*. To be sure, eco/theo/logy does not—should not—demand an inversion of this hierarchy but something more radical and essential: the dissolution of this dualism. *Why* should the gracious gift be valued above the material gift? *Why* should there be a *hierarchy* of gifts?

Of course, we could and should think of grace as permeating other-than-human nature, and this important task has been taken up by a number of thinkers.<sup>83</sup> However, to focus on a question which has been historically saturated by anthropocentric concerns potentially disturbs the ecological momentum of this study. A concluding remark is made by way of recourse to the following instruction by Duffy: "Theology must speak of God as well as humans, of the theological as well as of the psychological, of grace as well as nature."<sup>84</sup> Insofar as my thesis is theo/logical, Duffy's call is certainly valid. However, one cannot deny that theology has not spoken *enough* about other-than-human nature: indeed, when theology has spoken of "nature," it (they, we) has often spoken andro-anthropocentrically and anti-materially. I therefore concentrate on the *oikos*, which is possibly co/gift-ed by the divine, rather than those possible gifts which may *be* divine (the Christ, Holy Spirit, grace, etc.).

<sup>81</sup> Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1992), 79 [hereafter Duffy, *TGH*].

<sup>82</sup> This word appears constantly, e.g., Duffy, *TGH*, 25, 81, 107, 140, 179, etc.

<sup>83</sup> Refer to, e.g., the work of the process theologian of grace, Eulalio Baltazar. Duffy refers to Baltazar's *Teilhard and the Supernatural* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) in *The Graced Horizon*. But even Baltazar displays an anthropocentric bias; refer to Duffy, *TGH*, 182.

<sup>84</sup> Duffy, *TGH*, 55.

Taking all of the above considerations into account, the maintenance of the tension between the ecological and theological dimensions of this work is represented by its sub-title: "towards an eco/theo/logical aporetics": the "*theo*" is placed between forward slashes (rather than round brackets), registering the study's theological dimension, as well as signifying an awareness that the divine and the gracious cannot be restrained by brackets, spilling over, and into, that which is "properly" "logical" and "ecological."

## vi. Crisscrossing Ecotheology

Within the space of this prolegomenon, the nature and limits of this work have been substantially elucidated. This aporetics is a hermeneutics: it treats all corporeal entities *as* gifts; it is thereby a kind of ontics: it deals with the matrix-of-things. The reflection is also "theological" in a particular way, with its nuanced (open-ended, suspended) declaration of the possibility that a biblical deity co-gifts creation. The work's theological dimension, however, immediately raises a related question: in what ways does the present work converge with, and diverge from, the ever-growing and multifarious discipline of ecological theology? In other words, what are the correlations between the present work and ecotheology? After all, ecotheology, and, more broadly, ecospirituality engages with the question of the relation/s between the divine/sacred and creation: one would therefore expect certain overlapping—as well as deviation.

Ecotheology and the present aporetics crisscross in a number of ways, as has already been evidenced in the preceding sections with the citation of works by ecotheologians like Keller and Sallie McFague. Of course, only a brief treatment of the question of this un/relation is possible: a detailed elucidation, one that would do justice to the variety and richness of ecotheological discourses *and* to the

nuances of the present aporetics, would divert us from the immediate task.<sup>85</sup> To be sure, the present work could only arise in the context of a growing body of ecological and ecospiritual discourse.<sup>86</sup> The thesis explicitly draws on a relatively small but highly relevant set of innovative ecotheological texts: these include Jürgen Moltmann's *God in Creation*, Mark I. Wallace's *Fragments of the Spirit*, Keller's *Face of the Deep*, Jay McDaniel's *Earth, Sky, Gods, and Mortals*, Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Gaia and God*, and McFague's *The Body of God*.<sup>87</sup> In the present section, I highlight some of the ways in which our respective paths crisscross.

A first and fundamental agreement between these authors and myself is the Christian faith and tradition/s we share and refigure. I believe in a deity resonant with certain elements of Christianity. However, the present aporetics is bound neither by Scripture nor by church doctrine. As I noted above, this thesis advances according to a radically ecumenical context. The only requirement is a belief in, or perception of, creation as a gift.

The ecotheological texts cited here maintain various levels of fidelity to Scripture and mainstream theology. Most texts maintain an explicitly profound relationship with holy writings. This is most obviously the case with the work of Keller and Wallace, and, to a lesser extent, Ruether.<sup>88</sup> McFague maintains a healthy

<sup>85</sup> For texts that survey the range of ecotheological material, refer to *Theology for Earth Community: A Field Guide*, ed. Dieter T. Hesel (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996); Peter W. Bakken, Joan Gibb Engel, and J. Ronald Engel, *Ecology, Justice, and Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1995).

<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the work of Charlene Spretnak, which is generally (and somewhat generalizingly) critical of postmodern theory, provided much of the impetus for the present work; refer to *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature, and Place in a Hypermodern World*. Reading, MASS: Addison-Wesley, 1997, and, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991. I also thank Constant Mews and Kate Rigby for introducing me to ecological thought.

<sup>87</sup> These texts traverse the ecotheological "divisions" schematized in Ruether, *GG*, 240-253 (for there is certainly overlap): the works of Moltmann and Wallace highlight creation-centered spirituality; Keller's and McDaniel's texts exemplify process thought; and ecological feminism marks the texts of Keller and Ruether, and, less explicitly in McFague, *BG*.

<sup>88</sup> Keller, *FD* is a meditation on Genesis 1.2; Wallace, *FS* focuses on scriptural figurations of spirit (*FS*, ch. 5); the constructive element of Ruether, *GG* is guided by notions of covenant and sacrament (ch. 8-9).

suspicion towards too much dependence on the Bible.<sup>89</sup> The way I employ Scripture in the present work is in terms of how that text refers to the term "gift" (refer to § 1.1-2.) However, like a number of the named authors, I share an interest in the subversive aspects of Scripture towards totalizing tendencies in theology and philosophy.<sup>90</sup>

As for the relation between ecotheology and classical theology, some ecotheologians are more bound than others. With regard to *ex nihilo*, Moltmann's work—as radical as it is—stays loyal to church teachings on *ex nihilo*; he makes no room here for the possibility of co-creation.<sup>91</sup> Ruether identifies the teaching as a theological "dogma."<sup>92</sup> As I noted above, Keller's work on the *tehom* seriously challenges this fundamental theological doctrine, but this is characteristic of process theology in general.<sup>93</sup> McDaniel, another process thinker, also characterizes God as a co-creator.<sup>94</sup>

Ecotheological negotiations of the doctrine of the Trinity focus on the more "immanence-friendly" personae of the Trinity: the "cosmic Christ" is an important ecotheological motif.<sup>95</sup> However, one of the most significant ecotheological movements gaining sway involves engagements with the question of the Spirit. Moltmann teaches: "Creation in the Spirit is the theological concept which corresponds best to the ecological doctrine of creation which we are looking for and need today."<sup>96</sup> Wallace's *Fragments of the Spirit* is an eco-pneumatology drawn

<sup>89</sup> Refer to McFague, *TBG*, 32, 143-144. McFague's text is marked by an extraordinary openness and humility; refer to, e.g., *TBG*, 38, 46.

<sup>90</sup> The best examples are Keller, *FD*, McFague, *TBG*, and Wallace, *FS*.

<sup>91</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, e.g., 66, 73f, 86-93. Nevertheless, Moltmann is aware of other anti-ecological elements in theology; refer to, *GC*, e.g., 162f, 245.

<sup>92</sup> Ruether, *GG*, 26-27.

<sup>93</sup> Refer to John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), esp. 65f; also refer to David Ray Griffin, "Creation out of Nothing, Creation out of Chaos, and the Problem of Evil," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2001), 108-144.

<sup>94</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 49, 98.

<sup>95</sup> Refer to McFague, *TBG*, ch. 6; Moltmann, *GC*, 94-95.

<sup>96</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, 12.

from the Spirit's biblical nature-figurations (as breath, wind, water, dove). McFague depicts God as the spirit (*ruach*) of the body of creation.<sup>97</sup>

It is also worth mentioning here that all of these remarkable texts are panentheistic. This position seems to be the most credible eco-position to hold: traditional theism overemphasizes transcendence, while pantheism reduces the divine to a strict immanence; panentheism traverses the two dimensions without resting in either polarity.<sup>98</sup> While this eco-apoetics certainly welcomes these important renegotiations of doctrinal Christianity, they lie beyond the present work's scope: I attempt to shed light on the question of right relations with creation by dwelling upon the gift-aporia rather than re-interpreting foundational scriptural and theological figures.

This work has been influenced by ecotheology's attentiveness towards, and insistence upon, relationality. Moltmann utilizes striking (and erotic) theological concepts like *perichoresis* and "mutual interpenetration" to stress this divine-corporeal relationality.<sup>99</sup> McDaniel argues against all kinds of atomism (molecular, anthropological, spiritual).<sup>100</sup> Strikingly (from the perspective of orthodoxy), he even proposes an interdependency between God and creation: "God also depends on us."<sup>101</sup> Process eco/theology therefore questions divine omnipotence. In a similar key, Keller refers to the arresting notion of "interindebtedness," where all things depend on each other—a relevant notion, for indebtedness arises as a pivotal question in the present context.<sup>102</sup> But these thinkers also skillfully balance their emphases on relationality with their recognitions of singularity. Interestingly, McFague, who constantly emphasizes creation's interconnectedness, argues that

<sup>97</sup> McFague, *TBG*, esp. 143f.

<sup>98</sup> Refer to, e.g., McFague, *TBG*, 149-150; Keller, *FD*, 23; Wallace, *FS*, 143-144; McDaniel, *ESGM*, 50-51.

<sup>99</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, 16-17. Wallace also refers to *perichoresis*; *FS*, 7. McDaniel refers to Hua-Yen Buddhism's notion of "mutual penetration." *ESGM*, 103.

<sup>100</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, esp. 24-29.

<sup>101</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 99.

<sup>102</sup> Keller, *FD*, 274, n. 22.

interdependence also produces radical cosmological individuality and diversity.<sup>103</sup> The present work attempts to reflect the tension between creation's interconnectedness and individuality.

The radical eco-egalitarianism espoused in the present work perhaps exceeds the egalitarianism espoused by ecotheology—at least in terms of an explicit (and, as I explain below, a *qualified*) embrace of the humanly produced. The ecotheological texts utilized here do not *explicitly* affirm manufactured things. For instance, McDaniel's text moves in two directions: on the one hand, he emphasizes humans, animals, and plants, to the ostensible exclusion of the abiotic; on the other hand, he seems to base inherent value on the "aliveness" of all things, and, while he affirms that rocks are "alive" in some sense, this aliveness is not overtly extended to products.<sup>104</sup> Ruether's "biophilia" also extends beyond the biotic to include the abiotic, which prevents her text from becoming narrowly biocentric, but this biophilia is not explicitly extended to *techné*.<sup>105</sup> Likewise, when McFague argues that "no absolute distinction exists between the living and the nonliving," she does not explicitly include the humanly constructed.<sup>106</sup> Wallace's text also does not overtly embrace cultural products. Moltmann's text is the least biocentric, for, as Wallace points out, the ecologically powerful *God in Creation* is still informed by a theological anthropocentrism.<sup>107</sup> Whatever degrees of biocentrism these ecotheological texts express—and whether or not their biocentrism *implies* a radical eco-democratism—an explicit recognition of, and respect for, the *techné* of humans and other-than-human creatures is explicitly advanced in the present work.

<sup>103</sup> On McFague's stress on relationality, refer to *TBG*, e.g., 8, 9, 18; on her discussion of singularity, refer to *TBG*, 27f.

<sup>104</sup> On McDaniel's biocentrism, refer to *ESGM*, 27, 44, etc; on his egalitarianism, refer to *ESGM*, 92.

<sup>105</sup> Refer to Ruether, *GG*, e.g. 48.

<sup>106</sup> Refer to McFague, *TBG*, 106, 114.

<sup>107</sup> Wallace, *FS*, 165; I critiqued, primarily from the perspective of a gift apoetics, the passage Wallace refers to (*GC*, 71) in the Introduction to Chapter 2.

Apart from our shared faith/s and theological dispositions, a recognition of relationality and singularity, a certain agreement on intrinsic value, another common theme is our passion for material creation. The authors share a love for what-is, often expressed in terms of the depiction of creation as home.<sup>108</sup> Both ecotheology and this eco/theo/logical aporetics share a love of this *oikos*—creation.

### vii. Derrida's Gift

Thus far I have considered and reconfigured the terms "if" and "creation" in the assumption "If creation is a gift." A third concept indicated by the title and proposition of this meditation is "gift." What is a gift? How is it defined and developed here? And why is the gift itself an aporia and a problem?

To begin with, I adopt the everyday (western) definition of "gifting": in Horner's words, it occurs when "someone freely gives something to someone."<sup>109</sup> On the face of it, this practice does not pose a problem. But can a gift be freely given? The gift constitutes an aporia—it is impassable and/or contradictory. The gift's aporetic nature is starkly posed in Derrida's *Given Time*, the most determinative text for the present meditation.<sup>110</sup> It discloses the paradoxicality of the gift: "For there to be gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt."<sup>111</sup> And yet, the gift is marked precisely by its other. Robyn Horner concisely sums up the two crucial aspects of gift/ing and the concomitant dilemma: "Freedom and presence are the conditions of the gift as we know it. . . . If the gift is present—that is, if it can be identified as such—then the gift is no longer

<sup>108</sup> Refer to, e.g., McFague, *TBG*, ch.4; Keller, *FD*, 190f; McDaniel, *ESGM*, 85, 106; Wallace, *FS*, 4.

<sup>109</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 6; refer to Derrida, *GT*, 10. The qualifier "western" signifies a recognition that, in Ken Lokensgard's words, "Derrida's definition applies for only a limited number of people in today's world . . ." Ken Lokensgard, "The Matter of Responsibility: Derrida and Gifting Across Cultures," par. 26, in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4.1 (December 2002) <<http://www.jcrt.org/archives/04.1/lokensgard.shtml>> 10 September 2003. One wonders, however, how any other definition of "gift" could differentiate it from the word "exchange."

<sup>110</sup> It should be noted that I focus on that particular Derridean text in the name of manageability, since Derrida refers to the gift from his earliest works; refer to Derrida, *GT*, ix, n.1.

<sup>111</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 12.

gift but commodity, value, measure, or status symbol."<sup>112</sup> It turns out that the idea or definition of the gift "never seems to accord with its practical reality."<sup>113</sup> The gift is an aporia.

What will become apparent as the study proceeds is that the tension between the two aspects of the gift, presence (identification, exchange, conditionality, etc.) and freedom (gratuity, excess, unconditionality, etc.) acts as a kind of template here, substantially shaping the way other relevant texts are read. Consider the roughly synonymous terms surrounding "freedom" and "presence." In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, each of these terms may stand for these two clusters of concepts. For example, when I write "exchange," it also connotes "identity," "reciprocity," "knowledge," etc.<sup>114</sup> And so, this fundamental aporia (freedom and presence) is the pivot upon which this thesis turns.

Exchange marks all three aspects of gift/ing: the giver, the gift-thing, and the recipient. The giver usually receives something in return: be it another gift, gratitude, self-congratulation, or even hostility—for even displeasure or rejection gives something back to the gift-giver: the reinforcement of the giver's identity.<sup>115</sup> On the part of the recipient, the mere recognition of the gift is enough to bring it into circularity. The gift may lead to a counter-gift or a sense of indebtedness. Even indifference (for instance, apathy towards the gift) is simply a subtler gifting-back. The gift-thing itself likewise does not escape circular economy.<sup>116</sup> Whether it is a *pragma*, an intention, a value, or a symbol, it is nevertheless *identified* as a gift and this recognition brings it into the circle of exchange. If the gift is not identified *as such*,

<sup>112</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 4.

<sup>113</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 6.

<sup>114</sup> Refer to *GT*, 30; *OTG*, 59.

<sup>115</sup> Refer to Derrida, *GT*, 13.

<sup>116</sup> I qualify the word "economy" (which means: the law, *nomos*, of the house, *oikos*) with "circular" because the former term does not necessarily or exclusively entail exchange. For instance, Georges Bataille's notion of "general economy" exceeds the circularity of "restricted [exchange] economy." Refer to Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Vol. 1, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988) [hereafter Bataille, *TAS*]. I briefly refer to Bataille in § 2.2.2.

then it would perhaps escape exchange economy—remain *aneconomic*—but then it would no longer be a gift: it would not be phenomenally recognized *as such*. The conditions that therefore make gifting possible simultaneously make gifting impossible—or, more accurately: *the impossible*.<sup>117</sup> The perfect, pure, or ideal gift cannot be comprehended or experienced *by definition*.<sup>118</sup>

What is the significance of the gift-aporia in terms of subjectivity? Derrida argues that the “subject” and “object” are concepts and phenomena that reinforce the gift’s economic status. Gifting must occur outside, beyond, or before subjectivity: “If there is gift, the *given* of the gift . . . must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor)” and “if there is gift, it cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects, things, or symbols.” For Derrida, “the subject and the object are arrested affects of the gift.”<sup>119</sup>

So what does the gift’s excess or prior-ity mean in terms of intentionality?<sup>120</sup> According to the *OED*, to intend is “to apprehend, conceive; to think, estimate . . .” Consciousness and intention count, estimate, calculate. Insofar as the gift requires recognition, intention plays an indispensable role. (“It’s the thought that counts.”) However, the paradox of the gift weds the intentional with its other. First, why is the gift other-than-intentional? The gift happens as an event: it is “unforeseeable,” “irruptive,” “disinterested,” “unexplainable by a system of efficient causes.”<sup>121</sup> The gift-event brings “into relation luck, chance, the aleatory, *tukhé* [luck or fortune], with the freedom of the dice, with the donor’s gift throw.” And yet, Derrida cautions that, for gift to be gift there must be intentionality:

<sup>117</sup> Derrida differentiates between that which is impossible and *the impossible*. Derrida, *GT*, 7.

<sup>118</sup> “For finally, if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it. And this *even if or because or to the extent that we never encounter it, we never know it, we never verify it, we never experience it in its present existence or its phenomenon.*” Derrida, *GT*, 29.

<sup>119</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 7, 24.

<sup>120</sup> Expressing “prior-ity” with a hyphen emphasizes creation’s *immemoriality* rather than any insinuation of *superiority*.

<sup>121</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 122-123; until stated otherwise, the subsequent citations are drawn from these pages.

“effects of pure chance will never form a gift. . . . There is no gift without the intention of giving.” Phrased differently, Derrida gets to the heart of this particular paradox of gifting: “There must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or disorder, and there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must—miraculously, graciously—agree with each other.”

Now, Derrida’s *Given Time* has not lost its force or irritation. Though persuasive, Derrida’s analysis is annoying: who wants to concede that the gift is erased, erases itself? That its conditions produce its nullification? But, as Horner observes, the argument’s validity is evidenced in one’s everyday encounters: our experiences of gifting are tied to exchange, leading to its dissolution.<sup>122</sup>

Derrida’s analysis is as restrained as it is confronting: his discourse is marked by qualifications. Regarding the question of circularity and its effect on gifting, Derrida provides a two-way qualification: he argues that he is neither against exchange nor gifting in any simple or hyper-idealistic sense. With respect to exchange, Derrida stresses: “One should not necessarily flee or condemn circularity as one would . . . a vicious circle. . . . One must, in a *certain way* of course, inhabit the circle, turn around in it, live there a feast of thinking, and the gift, the gift of thinking, would be no stranger there.”<sup>123</sup> So Derrida should not be construed as simplistically denying or devaluing exchange; his work emphasizes the aporetic nature of the gift vis-à-vis its co-implication with commerce.

Derrida constantly qualifies the possibility of the gift with the phrase “if there is any.”<sup>124</sup> The logic of the “if” and familial concepts (“as if,” “perhaps,” “maybe,” etc.) steadfastly mark his discourse. Derrida explicitly refers to the “perhaps” of his meditation: “a certain *perhaps* or *maybe* will be both the modality and the modality to

<sup>122</sup> Refer to Horner, *RGG*, 4-6. Webb observes: “Everybody seems to know that giving [gifting] is calculated, not spontaneous, and structured (and thereby canceled) by the expectation of an equivalent return.” Webb, *TGG*, 4. (Note: Webb often utilizes the term “giving”—as well as “gifting”—to refer to gifting.)

<sup>123</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 9.

<sup>124</sup> Refer to e.g. Derrida, *GT*, 7, 24, 26-27, 28, etc.

be modified . . ."<sup>125</sup> Derrida moves beyond the significance of the "if" as resistance against hubris, and locates its *structural* character in relation to intention, faith, and experience.<sup>126</sup> His approach to the question of the gift is obviously inscribed by a necessary uncertainty and perplexity—aporias provoke nothing less.<sup>127</sup> This hesitation is most profoundly acknowledged in the following remark (which takes place in the context of a discussion about gifting and subjectivity): "If the gift is annulled in the economic odyssey of the circle as soon as it appears *as* gift or as soon as it signifies *itself as* gift, there is no longer any "logic of the gift," and one may safely say that a consistent discourse on the gift becomes impossible."<sup>128</sup> This comment is prefaced by an "if" and constantly qualified by the "as" (and the emphases are not added). Note, too, that this statement is made early on in the text: Derrida recognizes that discussions on the gift are necessarily inconsistent—an inconsistency structured by the "madness" involved in thinking gift/ing.<sup>129</sup>

The present aporetic acknowledges and affirms this madness. But why should one confirm and affirm this inability to speak consistently about the gift? As provocative as it sounds, this "inadequacy" is a good thing: *by definition*, any discourse on whatever is mysterious ultimately fails to grasp its subject matter. Derrida explicitly states that the gift has a "mysterious and elusive character."<sup>130</sup> The mysterious ultimately eludes the gaze and grasp of epistemic mastery. Derrida avoids any pretension to totality, as well as any pretension to an absolute apophaticism (negativity, unknowing) and its concomitant silence: after all, he obviously writes on the gift.<sup>131</sup> He displays an awareness of the ultimate inconsistency involved in thinking gifting, and this kind of awareness guides the

<sup>125</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 35.

<sup>126</sup> Derrida, *GT*, e.g., 93, 95.

<sup>127</sup> "Uncertainty" is an essential feature when thinking about gift/ing; refer to *GT*, 46, 93.

<sup>128</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 24.

<sup>129</sup> Refer to Derrida, e.g., *GT*, 34f, 127, n. 12.

<sup>130</sup> *GT*, 42. And one could propose that any given subject is ultimately, irreducibly mysterious.

<sup>131</sup> It is interesting to note that *apophysis* also refers to a "sentence, verdict, or decision . . ." Derrida, *SLN*, 35

following discourse by respectfully treating the thing in question—freely given creation—as an aporia. The essential discursive inconsistency involved in the question of the gift is therefore *not* a negative criticism. Referring to thinkers who have broached the question of the gift in the past, Derrida explains: "neither Molière nor Mauss, at bottom, has ever said anything about the gift *itself*. And what we are trying to explain here is why there is *no fault* in that."<sup>132</sup>

### viii. Creation-Gift-Aporia

The present work conjoins a thinking of creation with the gift-aporia to produce an aporetic about what-is. A number of preliminary remarks are warranted in light of this pairing. They relate to (1) the question of two kinds of gifts; (2) the relationality of gifting; and, (3) the "aesthetics" of this aporetic's radical eco-egalitarianism.

First of all, the gift-aporia may be considered along two differentiated but ultimately interrelated paths; Derrida explains: "There would be, *on the one hand*, the gift that gives something determinate (a given, a present in whatever form it may be, . . . 'natural' or symbolic thing . . .) and, *on the other hand*, the gift that gives not a given but the *condition* of a present given in general . . ."<sup>133</sup> Caputo offers an excellent elucidation of this gift which is otherwise than ontico-ontological; he explains that this gift relates to "*how* things 'come.'"<sup>134</sup> This gift may be figured as *différance* or *khôra*. Caputo argues that, owing to its anti-Platonic, anonymous, quasi-transcendental, pre-subjective, disseminative, uncontrollable and improper non-nature, this gift differs from a traditional gift-giving deity: "Events happen in *différance* not from (*par*) a spirit of generosity, but *with* generosity (*Given Time*, 162),

<sup>132</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 113, n. 4. Marcel Mauss was an anthropologist whose famous work on the gift in the early twentieth century sparked off interest in the question of the gift in many academic disciplines; refer to Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1924 (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>133</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 54.

<sup>134</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 160.

that is to say, with a profusion and abundance that is the issue not of a subject's generosity but of a certain disseminative process."<sup>135</sup>

To be sure, a meditation on this kind of gift would prove insightful on a number of levels: for instance, I noted above that Keller casts the *tehom* of Genesis in terms of *différance*, and so there may be an ecotheological opening for a meditation on this *khôral* gift. However, as fascinating and productive as such an endeavor may prove to be, what is attempted here is a rethinking of things-as-gifts rather than the gift/s that provide the condition for ontic gifting. Certainly, the "what" of creation" is indelibly interrelated with its "how." Nevertheless, the present focus lies on gift-things. Due to the attention paid to the thingness of our *oikos* by the present work (combined with the limitations of space), the quasi-transcendental gift is suspended here.

Now, the suspension of the gift of "how things come" in their quasi-transcendental correlates to the bracketing of the question of the "who-what" of co-creativity discussed above. In other words, the suspension of the question of what/who else *co-creates* creation, coincides with a suspension of the question of what/who else *gifts* creation (assuming the possibility of a relation between the two). The bracketing of the source of the gift-giver is warranted by the gift-aporia itself. Schmitz argues that gift-giving is "an originative activity that is radically non-systematic. . . . For the term *gift* is charged with discontinuity and contingency, with risk, vulnerability and surprise." So far, so good—but Schmitz immediately adds: "Moreover, the gift points beyond itself to its source, to a more or less definitely apprehended giver."<sup>136</sup> If gift-giving is "charged with" "discontinuity and contingency, with risk, vulnerability and surprise," then how can freely given creation "point beyond itself to its source"? The gift-giver of the creation-gift cannot be "definitely apprehended"—at least in any epistemological sense. The gift

<sup>135</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 168. Marion also offers two paths to thinking gifting. On the one hand, there is a "giving . . . with neither giver nor given . . . a pure giving"; on the other, giving "is accomplished by the giver." Marion, *GWB*, 104. While Marion is interested in the first, I am more interested—in a nuanced way—with the latter.

<sup>136</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 44.

is given in risk, surprise, and undecidability by a giver who risks, surprises, and remains incognito.

And so, the questions of (co-)creators and (co-)gift-givers is bracketed while I reflect on creation itself. However (for this question is suspended in both senses), it is worth noting here how the above discussion on divine creativity may be thought in terms of the gift-aporia. The gift is an aporia because it seems to be marked by *both* unilaterality (unconditionality, freedom) *and* bi(multi)laterality (conditionality, return). The notion of creation-from-nothing would therefore reflect the aspect of one-way gifting, while a relational figuring of creativity reflects gifting's circularity. Hence, a certain retention of the tension between the *ex nihilo* thesis and its other also mirrors the tension in and of the gift itself. The act of not-choosing reflects the aporeticity of the creation-gift.

However, the retention of the possibility of the *ex nihilo* should not be misconstrued as a bias towards unilaterality and singularity. I noted above that "creation" implies here a relational creation. Now, "gift/ing" also implies the characteristic of relationality, for this act involves the gratuitous giving of something *by* someone *to* someone; gifting, by definition, implies interdependent interconnectedness. However (and once again as is the case with "creation"), I focus on the gift and its reception—rather than the gift-giver (for example, other creatures, God, etc.). I focus, in particular, on humans as gift-recipients. This emphasis is ethically driven: my intention is to interpret every thing that we humans encounter as a gift (including our selves and all others), and to indicate ways in which our responses to gift-things reflect and respect the gift in all its aporeticity. Hence, the thesis focuses on the given gift and how it may be received.

Due to the egalitarian character of this aporetics, the object-act of "gift/ing" is not here restricted to humans: givers and receivers include the possibility of other-than-human beings. All beings are here perceived as gifting their selves to themselves and each other. An immediate objection arises: for a gift to be gift, it must be identified as such: there should be an intention to give. It therefore seems presumptuous (and perhaps a little "ludicrous") to propose that other-than-human

creatures perceive creation-things in their giftness. First of all, we should not discount this possibility. Moreover, this objection is ultimately irrelevant: the anti-eco/theo/logical perceptions of *human beings* account for the violation of creation, and so this thesis is addressed *to humans for humans*. What counts is that *we humans* perceive and receive creation in *oikological* terms, and this aporetics of gift/ing attempts to contribute to this radical transfiguration of human-perception and human-action.

The promotion of a radically ecological egalitarianism opens onto a further query: if the following work attempts to think through the figuring of every *pragma*-in-relation as gift, does this entail that it seeks to beautify or aestheticize every thing? In other words, is this aporetics an aesthetics? This study is not an "aesthetics" in the conventional sense, which is "concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty . . ." <sup>137</sup> Of course, such a (mis)reading may be expected: the term "gift" certainly resonates with that which is beautiful, special, precious, artistic, or talented ("gifted"). <sup>138</sup> One should not deny that the word "gift" is, to reconfigure Gerard Manly Hopkins' phrase, charged with a certain grandeur, and that this word gets linked to special acts and things (real and unreal): hence, the significance of phrases like "the gift of life," "the gift of friendship," "the gift of nature," and so on, as well as the cherishing of gift-giving festivals like birthdays or Christmas. Indeed, it is precisely because "gift/ing" is such a powerful concept and phenomenon that it warrants the kind of investigation undertaken here. The "gift" is both paradoxical (free, circular) and prestigious (special, high-profile): *the gift moves us*.

<sup>137</sup> NODE, 28.

<sup>138</sup> A rare example of a theological connection between the gift, beauty, and other-than-human Nature, is found in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa (335-395): "The gifts bestowed upon the spot by Nature who beautifies the earth with unstudied grace are such as these: below, the river Halys makes the place fair to look upon with his banks and gleams like a golden ribbon through their deep purple, reddening his current with the soil he washes down. Above, a mountain densely overgrown with wood stretches with its long ridge . . ." Gregory of Nyssa, "Letter Fifteen: To Adelphius the Lawyer," in PNF, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-05/Npnf2-05-58.htm>> 1 August 2003.

But this aporetics transgresses "aesthetics" in its conventional sense by virtue of its radical democratism: it treats *all* things as gifts; if all things are gifts, then, on the one hand, one is faced with the possibility that *all* entities may be conceived or perceived as beautiful, special, or precious. Hierarchical binaries like beautiful/ugly, special/banal, and *phusis/techné* become irrelevant in this context, for every-thing is raised to the level of "beauty"—if beauty (also) marks the gift. The two constitutive features are exchange and excess. Now, it probably seems odd (or even scandalous) to suggest that *every thing*—from a flower in bloom to the fork on one's plate—*is a gift* and therefore beautiful, but it is only a scandal for a perception fundamentally restricted by the abovementioned binarism, by our instrumentalism, by our world-weariness, and absent-mindedness. (The creation-gift's already-thereness obscures our capacity to perceive it as gift. In other words, perhaps what-is is imperceptible *as gift* because it is the "beginning of gifts," thereby leading to a failure to receive it *as gift*.) <sup>139</sup> And so, this aporetics may therefore be as a most radical aesthetics, reflecting the original meaning of the word from which it derives: *aisthētēs* denotes "a person who perceives," and "aesthetics" once implied a theory of sensory perception or embodied responsiveness to things. <sup>140</sup>

### ix. The Path Of This Aporitics

The gift is certainly an aporia. For Derrida, the gift cannot appear as such: "the gift does not *exist* and does not *present* itself." <sup>141</sup> And yet, Derrida does not deny the phenomenality of the circulated gift: "we do not mean to say that *there is no* exchanged gift. One cannot deny the *phenomenon*, nor that which presents this

<sup>139</sup> Thomas Traherne (1636-1674) seems to acknowledge the blind spot created by the creation-gift's precedence: "And remember always how great so ever the world is, it is the beginning of Gifts, the first thing which God bestows to every infant, by the very right of his [sic] nativity. Which because men are blind, they cannot see, and therefore know not that God is bountiful." Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, "The Second Century [hereafter Traherne, CM], on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/traherne/centuries.all.html#ii>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>140</sup> NODE, 28.

<sup>141</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 15.

precisely phenomenal aspect of exchanged gifts. But the apparent, visible contradiction of these two values—gift and exchange—must be problematized.”<sup>142</sup> I attempt to rethink this problematization in a “positive” and “constructive” *oiko/theo/logical* direction. The gift is marked by the differing marks of freedom and presence: it is therefore an aporia, paradox, or contradiction. What does this mean if one proposes that creation is a gift (freely-gifted and identified as such)? How can creation be both freely given and identified as such? After all, the recognition of creation as a gift immediately annuls creation’s giftness. This aporia is certainly troubling. How should this tension be confronted? Can the aporia be resolved—and *must* it?

Along the way to broaching the questions associated with the gift-aporia and its relation to creation, I carry out my extended meditation on the creation-gift by way of examinations of relevant texts. These texts include the Bible, pre-twentieth century theology, twentieth century theology, and a critique of Derridean aporetics of gifting.

In the next chapter, I locate and consider those points where “gift” appears in the Bible, and in classic and twentieth century theological writings. I examine the ways in which the two aspects of the gift, its linearity and circularity, are cast in these texts. Twentieth century texts by Schmitz, Webb, and Marion that deal with the gift are also analyzed. This retracing prepares a path for concentrating on ways in which the gift’s aporeticity may be thought anew. To the best of my knowledge, this kind of critical survey has never been attempted.

In the third chapter, I begin by examining the question of the relation between the given and the gift, for Marion rethinks the gift along phenomenological grounds. I then turn to a discussion of the principal notion that drives the thesis, *oscillation*, as a way of engaging the two divergent elements of gifting, excess and exchange. This discussion critically engages the work of Webb, Caputo, and Derrida.

<sup>142</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 37.

The final chapter is devoted to sketching ways in which our interactivity with creation reflects its aporetic giftness. Oscillation plays a pivotal role in this sketch. Such a task is innovative because the sketch is informed by the gift’s aporeticity. The chapter focuses on the following *eco/theo/logically* appropriate responses and interactions to the creation-gift: silences, tremblings, letting-be (and violence), use, enjoyment, and return. Hence, the fourth chapter moves in a “constructive” direction, while the previous chapters are essentially evaluative. This direction is unique in that it is thoroughly informed by a radically aporetic understanding of the gift.

## 2. THE GIFTS OF SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

### A Brief History Of The Gift-Aporia

This thesis carries out an extended meditation on the gift's aporeticity, and what this duality may mean *eco/theo/logically*, that is, if creation is a gift, perhaps *co/gift-ed* by God. An appropriate starting-point would therefore be the broader context of the ways in which the gift has been figured in the Bible and Christian theology, for therein one finds traces of the gift's paradoxicality. The present chapter may therefore be described as a kind of "history" or retracing of this aporeticity throughout Christian theology. Along the way, the following ideas come to the fore: indebtedness, enjoyment, gratuity, receptivity, squandering, and so on—matters that are then addressed in more detail in subsequent chapters. I begin the retracing with the Bible and archival theology (§ 2.1). This section highlights the disseminative, disjunctive nature of the gift. I then turn to twentieth century theological reflections on gifting, focusing on aspects of the work of Schmitz, Webb, and Marion, and their relation to the tension of the gift and how these thinkers negotiate it (§ 2.2).

### 2.1 GIFTS IN SCRIPTURE AND ARCHIVAL THEOLOGY

In the following subsection, I examine the word "gift" as it appears in Scripture. The term's semantic multivalence is highlighted. Gifts are categorized as conditional (gift-offerings, gift-bribes, etc.) or unconditional (gratuitous gifts, grace) (§ 2.1.1). I then locate and discuss how these two competing aspects of the gift are negotiated on the rare occasions when archival theology (pre-twentieth century theology) refers to gifts other than grace (§ 2.1.2).

A number of introductory remarks will clarify the nature of this retracing. First, it is intended as an overview: the crux of the present work lies in the late-modern thinking of gifting and its development in an *oiko/theo/logical* direction,

and so the retracing of the Bible and archival theology is necessarily broad and introductory. Second, the study restricts itself to (Judeo-)Christian texts, beginning with Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Third, only those texts in archival theology that explicitly use the word "gift" are treated here. It should also be noted that I do not aim for a thoroughgoing etymological or exegetical study here, nor am I entering into the labyrinthine questions of translation, context, intertext, and so on. What is being identified is the word "gift," its various meanings, and the way the term has been taken up by those who have taken the time to meditate on the idea. In other words, I take the texts *at their word*. Such measures are necessary, owing to the limitations of space: after all, the following retracing traces a specific term over an immense textual landscape.

#### 2.1.1 The Bible's Un/Conditional Gifts

To begin with, how is the word "gift" figured in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures? The term "gift" is an astonishing scriptural example of a word saturated in plurivocity. *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* identifies twenty-one variant meanings.<sup>2</sup> I cite here some of the most diverse semantic categories assembled under the rubric of "gift." The *Concordance* provides the following classifications: gift as reward (*eshkar*, e.g., Ps 72.10); as offering (*minchah*, e.g., 2 Sam 8.2); as bribe (*terumah*, Prov 29.4); as impure gift (*nedeh*, e.g., Ezek 16.33); as desired gift (*doma*, e.g., Mt 7.11; Phil 4.17); the act of gifting (*dosis*, e.g., Jas 1.17); the specifically material gift (*doron*, e.g., Mt 2.11; Rev 11.10); and variations of the "free gift" denoting a spiritual gift (*dorea*, e.g., Acts 2.38; Eph 3.7; *dorema*, e.g., Rom 5.16) or

<sup>1</sup> Schmitz crosses the question of the relation between hellenistic philosophy and the gift—but only cursorily. He refers to other thinkers who have tackled the relation of pre-Christian philosophy and gift theology, including: Zachary Hayes, *The General Doctrine of Creation in the Thirteenth Century with special emphasis on Matthew of Aquasparta* (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1964); and, A. C. Pegis, *St. Thomas and the Greeks* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1951) [hereafter Pegis, *STG*]. Also refer to Robert H. Bremner, *Giving: Charity and Philanthropy in History* (New Brunswick, N.Y.: Transaction Publishers, 1994). The question of this relation exceeds the parameters of the present work.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 390.

grace (*charisma*, e.g., Rom 1.11; 1 Cor 7.7). And so, sometimes the "gift" is identified as absolutely conditional (such as a bribe or sacrifice) and sometimes as purely unconditional (such as grace). Sometimes these meanings crossover or crisscross each other. Hence, one is faced with a dilemma: biblically, the term "gift" is so semantically diverse it seems to defy definition. If so, how can one gather these apparently disparate and contradictory meanings under the name "gift"? At the risk of homogenization, it is therefore necessary to provisionally narrow this broad semantic field in the following way: in light of the widely accepted definition of the gift (a freely given thing identified as such), the following retracing is thematized according to the notions of conditional and unconditional gifts. I turn to specific texts in order to illustrate these categories of the gift.

The most striking characteristic of "gift" as presented in Scripture is the group of gifts that may be arranged under the heading "conditional": gifts construed as offerings, bribes, rewards, etc. This feature is striking because *today* we ordinarily identify a gift as that which is given unconditionally or freely; hence, the contradictoriness of conditional gifts. According to the Derridean reading of gifting, sacrificial and almsgiving gifts are rendered manifestly problematic: Derrida rightly casts doubt on the identification of sacrifices and alms, for these gifts are premised on the generation of an exchange, be it a benefit, protection, security, and so on; chance (and) encounter are denied by the regularity of sacrifice and almsgiving. As Derrida notes, almsgiving "becomes prescribed, programmed, obligated, in other words bound. And a gift must not be *bound*, in its purity, nor even *binding*, obligatory or obliging."<sup>3</sup> Derrida immediately mentions religion and the religious here, identifying religiosity with binding: as Derrida would know, the Latin word *religare* means "to bind."

Keeping these thoughts in mind (and to which I return), I turn to texts that provide some of the more remarkable examples of conditional gifts. In Deuteronomy 16.17, the command is given: "Each of you *must* bring a gift in

<sup>3</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 137.

*proportion* to the way the LORD your God has blessed you."<sup>4</sup> And the following command is given in Ezekiel 20.40: "For on my holy mountain . . . I will *require* your contributions and the choicest of your gifts."<sup>5</sup> Consider the vocabulary of force and condition: "must," "proportion," "require."

Isaiah connects the bribe with the gift: "Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts." (Isa 1.23) Ezekiel identifies a relationship between certain acts of gifting with bribery and defilement; speaking for Yahweh, he proclaims: "Gifts are given to all whores; but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from all around for your whorings." (Ezek 16.33) On behalf of God, Ezekiel proclaims: "When you offer your gifts . . . you defile yourselves" and "my holy name you shall no more profane with your gifts and your idols." (Ezek 20.31; 20.39c) A more seductive bribery is evidenced in Psalm 45.12: "the people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts."

Conditional gifts are not limited to the First Testament. Matthew's Jesus upholds the notion of compelling gifts: "offer the gift that Moses *commanded*." (Mt 8.4c) When Paul thanks the Philippians for their generous gifting, he explains: "I have been *paid in full* and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have *received* from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent . . ." (Phil 4.18) This verse is constituted by the language of economic exchange: having been "paid in full," satisfaction registers upon receipt of the gifts. The Philippians' gifts have balanced an account: "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account." (Phil 4.17.) The Philippians' generosity towards an apostle of Christ seems to be earning them credit in heaven.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, some gifts are more

<sup>4</sup> The *New International Version* of the Bible [hereafter *NIV*], on the *Bible Gateway* website, Gospel Communications International, U.S.A. [hereafter *BiG*] <<http://www.biblegateway.com/cgi-bin/bible?language=english&version=NIV&passage=Heb+8.4>> 4 August 2003. All biblical emphases are added.

<sup>5</sup> The *New Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1993) [hereafter *NRSV*]. Unless otherwise stated, I utilize the *NRSV*.

<sup>6</sup> The *NIV* reads: "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be *credited to your account*." *NIV* in *BiG* <<http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?passage=Philippians+4:2-23&version=NIV>> 4 August 2003.

demanding than others, but all the cases of gifts cited here—and there are more—are conditional: the gift is owed, expected, demanded, or rewarded.

In stark contradistinction, there are *also* biblical instances of the unconditional gift—the idealistic or perfect conceptualization of “gift” which is prevalent today. This kind of unambiguously unconditional gifting occurs very rarely in the First Testament. Two texts deserve mention. First, Esther 2.18 refers to an instance of gifting that comes very close to pure gratuity: the reader is told that King Ahasuerus “gave gifts with royal liberality” to his people upon his marriage to Esther. There is a “cause” (the wedding) but the monarch’s gifting seems largely unmotivated by economic kinds of self-interest noted above. As is noted by thinkers cited below, gifting between subjects is probably always self-interested in some sense. However, one may retain the distinction between an abundantly generous giving—a giving out of sheer munificence, perhaps like King Ahasuerus’s—and gift/ing in order to gain (gift-as-bribe, gift-as-reward, etc).

A second text is also fascinating. The author of Ecclesiastes advises gift-recipients to simply enjoy the gift without return:

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he [sic] enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God.” (Eccl 5.18-19)

In this passage the gift is offered for joyous consumption rather than debt-ridden reciprocation. The gift provides pleasure rather than obligation. This is in stark contrast to the explicitly mercantile gifts cited above. Like the question of debt, the question of enjoyment recurs throughout the present discourse on the gift, and is discussed in more detail in due course.

Now, despite texts like Esther 2.18 and Ecclesiastes 5.18, the Hebrew Scriptures overwhelmingly portray calculating kinds of gifts—gifts without the kind

of abandon or impulse which marks the “gift” as we tend to conceive it. J. A. Selbie suggests: “One did not come before prophet or king or God with empty hands. The English words ‘gift’ and ‘present’ are apt, indeed, to convey an idea of spontaneity about the transaction which was generally absent.”<sup>7</sup> The spontaneity of the gift emerges more clearly in the Christian Scriptures. While the First Testament rarely figures unconditional gifts, Second Testament texts convey the idea of an unconditional gift, particularly with grace—the unconditional gift *par excellence*—as a prominent motif throughout the Christian Scriptures. For example, Paul declares: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is *not your own doing*; it is the gift from God—*not the result from works*, so that no one may boast.” (Eph 2.8-9) Here the gift is not tied to the receiver’s enterprise.

However, Second Testament texts that promote unconditional human gifting nevertheless seem to entangle themselves in the circularity of the gift. For instance, on the one hand, the Christic logic in Luke overturns the notion of giving in strictly reciprocal and equivalent terms: “If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? . . . But love your enemies, do good, and lend [gift], expecting nothing in return.” (Lk 6.35a)<sup>8</sup> However, this subversive logic immediately reverts to an economic rationale, for this kind of giving nevertheless earns divine credit: “Your reward will be great . . .” (Lk 6.35b) Despite the reversion to calculation, one nevertheless glimpses the “mad” logic of unidirectional gifting.

A text that most aptly captures the aporeticity of gifting is chapter 9 of The Second Letter to the Corinthians, because it clearly conveys the diverging elements

<sup>7</sup> Selbie confirms that the conditional gift continues to prevail in Eastern cultures: “So firmly established is the custom in the East of giving a present upon certain conditions that the latter is demanded as a right.” J. A. Selbie, “Gift,” in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958) 172-173, 173. (This prevalence is not assumed here to be an exclusively “Eastern” phenomenon.)

<sup>8</sup> Simon Jarvis notes that the original Greek and Latin word translated in this verse as “lend” more accurately correspond to the verb form of “gift” (*dapizete, date*). Jarvis, “Problems in the Phenomenology of the Gift,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6.2 (August 2001): 67-77, 74.

of condition and gratuity. 2 Corinthians 9.5 reads: "I thought it *necessary* to *urge* the brothers [sic] to go on ahead to you, and *arrange in advance* for this bountiful gift that you have *promised*, so that it may be ready as a *voluntary gift* and not as an *extortion*." Paul hopes for a voluntary gift: a present given freely, without coercion. But this hope is bound to a lexicon of necessitation, sway, arrangement, and of holding the Corinthians to their promise. The freedom of the gift is bound up. Contradictoriness marks the verses that follow: "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you *must* give as you have *made up your mind*, not *reluctantly* or under *compulsion*, for God loves a *cheerful giver*." (2 Cor 9.6-7) Paul understandably privileges the cheerful and generous gift-giver, but this privilege is destabilized in light of: (1) injunction: the Corinthians are *commanded* to be generous; each of us "*must* give"; (2) calculation: they/we must "make up our minds," especially when we take into consideration God's love of a "cheerful giver"; and, (3) reward: generosity's harvest is *bountiful*. Despite Paul's plea for freeing up the gift, he encourages a now-classic economic formula: *reaping what is sown*.

In sum, the present subsection involved a discussion of the issue (the question, the dissemination) of the multifarious gifts of the Bible. However, one gift seems to be starkly lacking—pronounced in light of the present work: the creation-gift itself. Doesn't the Bible ever figure creation itself as a gift? Surprisingly, there seems to be no explicit coupling of the terms "gift" and "creation" in Scripture. Now, certain passages may perhaps be *construed* as intimating or indicating a correlation between gifting and creation, such as the biblical "giving" in Gen 1.29-30 or Deut 6.10-11. But these givings are semantically

different from "gifting." As for the Second Testament, pure gift/ing certainly appears in the form of "grace." However (and once again), any pairing between the two terms would be somewhat contrived. In sum, the Bible does not explicitly figure a relation between "gift" and "creation." To be sure, the observation that "gift" and "creation" is *not* explicitly linked by Christianity's foundational text is all the more remarkable insofar as the connection *is* made, albeit rarely, by Christian thinkers over the centuries (as the following retracing demonstrates)—and (perhaps more frequently) by believers generally. Indeed, this connection has become so ingrained that the thought of "the creation-gift as a divine gift" is today a theological given: after all, which Christian would deny that creation is a gift from God?

### 2.1.2 Archival Theology's Un/Conditional Gifts

The above survey illustrates the fact that Scripture is certainly fertile ground in terms of references to gifts. But the Bible does not, unsurprisingly, take up or treat the question of the gift in any apparently philosophical or theological way.<sup>10</sup> If the Bible does not explicitly think gift/ing in any reflective or sustained way, when and how does archival theology think it? In order to negotiate this question, the act of retracing continues along the lines established above: I locate the most significant explicit references to un/conditional gifts in archival theology, and I examine them in light of questions like gratuity, return, enjoyment, etc. Only those

<sup>9</sup> The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann interprets Deuteronomy 6.10(-11) as a text that figures the land as God's gift. Brueggemann refers to this text as one marked by a "rhetoric" of "pure gift, radical grace." Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002), 46. (I cite the NRSV, while Brueggemann quotes from the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible—the two renderings are similar.) But the text itself does not figure the land as a gift (pure or impure): "And when Yahweh your God brings you into the land which he [sic] swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you . . ." The exegete practices a hermeneutical leap from a divine *giving* to an unconditional *gifting*.

<sup>10</sup> On the question of the relation between Scripture, theology, and doctrine, refer to, e.g., Kevin Hart, "Introduction to the 2000 Edition," in *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), esp. xxiii-xxiv.

texts which offer more than a passing comment are cited—though the texts are usually not much more than that. Finally, I postpone references to creation-gifts for the final chapter, for, at this stage, I pay attention to the question of whether and how thinkers think the gift-aporia rather than the creation-gift-aporia.

A number of theologians preserve the circularity of the gift—even when the gift is grace. John Chrysostom (347-407) rhetorically asks:

What then can it be but extreme senselessness . . . not even to give a return for a free gift. . . . Yet surely, even antecedently to the kingdom, and to all the rest, even for the very fact of His [God's; sic] giving, we ought to feel bound to Him. . . . Now when His gifts are so great, and His demands exceedingly easy, and we do not supply even these; what deep of hell must we not deserve? . . . Having then considered all these things, and calculated what we have received, what we are to receive, what is required of us, let us show forth all our diligence on the things spiritual.<sup>11</sup>

To “return a free gift”: the gift now becomes explicitly implicated in exchange economy. Note, too, the economic language: “bound,” “demands,” “calculated,” and so on. Another remark by Chrysostom promotes this kind of stringent reciprocity: “a gift is not given to those who are hated, but to friends and those who have been well-pleasing . . .”<sup>12</sup> According to this logic, the gift rewards friendship; the gift rewards the gift of friendship.

Thomas Bunyan (1628-1688) notes the gift's condition of obligation when it comes to the gift of the “fear of the Lord”: “Great gifts naturally tend to oblige,” and “this fear of God teaches a man to put a due estimation upon every gift of God

<sup>11</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, “Homily 45,” § 3, trans. George Prevost, rev. M. B. Riddle [hereafter Chrysostom, *HM*] in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T. and T. Clark/Wm. B. Eerdmans, no date) [hereafter *PNF*], on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-10/npnf1-10-51.htm>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel According to St John*, “Homily 51,” in *PNF*, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-14/npnf1-14-55.htm>> 1 August 2003.

bestowed upon us . . .”<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, Bunyan does not explain the qualifying phrase “naturally tend to”; whatever thoughts he has about this natural tendency of the gift to oblige (and I return to his thoughts on the gift in § 4.2.4), Bunyan clearly registers the gift's propensity to oblige—even though the gift is, by definition, that which would not oblige.

Andrew Murray (1828-1917) conveys three traditional characteristics of the gift in his own writings in the following passage: enjoyment of the gift, the gift as sacrifice, and the return of the gift:

People say, ‘Does not God give us all good gifts to enjoy?’ But do you know that the reality of the enjoyment is in the giving back? Just look at Jesus—God gave Him a wonderful body. He kept it holy and gave it as a sacrifice to God. This is the beauty of having a body. God has given you a soul; this is the beauty of having a soul—you can give it back to God.<sup>14</sup>

Not only does this passage reinforce the notion that a gift should be returned; it also attempts to make enjoyment bilateral: one only superficially enjoys the gift by taking it; the “real” enjoyment supposedly comes with its return. Perhaps Murray is wary of the risk of enjoyment as a pure—and selfish?—receiving. Observe also Murray's instrumentalism: the body (and soul) is beautiful insofar as it can be returned. The body (and soul) is not enjoyed *per se* but because it is a gift-sacrifice that returns to its sender.

Perhaps inspired by its discourses on grace, theologians began to reflect on the gratuity of divine gifting, and thereby corporeal gift exchange seems to have begun to sit uneasily in the context of divine economy: one finds moments in

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Bunyan, *A Treatise of the Fear of God*, ed. George Offer (London: N. Ponder, 1679), ch. 6, in *Acacia John Bunyan Online Library* <<http://acacia.pair.com/Acacia/John.Bunyan/Sermons/Allegories/Treatise.Fear.God/6.html>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Murray, *The Deeper Christian Life: An Aid to its Attainment*, “Consecration,” § 3 (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1895) [hereafter Murray, *DCL*], on CCEL <[http://www.ccel.org/m/murray/deeper/deeper\\_life08.htm](http://www.ccel.org/m/murray/deeper/deeper_life08.htm)> 1 August 2003.

which the gift-as-sacrifice (or offering/bribe/etc.) is questioned and criticized. Irenaeus encourages oblation-gifts but immediately qualifies this directive by stating: "not that He [God; sic] stands in need of a sacrifice from us . . ." <sup>15</sup> Assuming divine gratuity and independence, Tatian the Assyrian (110-172) provides a harsher criticism of religious gifting: "Nor even ought the ineffable God to be presented with gifts; for He [God] who is in want of nothing is not to be misrepresented by us as though He were indigent." <sup>16</sup> Minucius Felix (third century) rhetorically asks: "Shall I offer victims and sacrifices to the Lord, such as He has produced for my use, that I should *throw back* to Him His own gift?" <sup>17</sup> Arnobius (284-305) also questions the economy of gifting as it relates to divinity: "For this belongs specially to deities, to be generous in forgiving, and to seek no return for their gifts." <sup>18</sup> Even Chrysostom, who, on the one hand, insists on returning the grace-gift, separates Christian gifting from the "Judaical grossness" of animal sacrifice. <sup>19</sup> Such statements outline and promote a human gifting that reflects the presumed unconditionality of divine gifting.

While the conditional gift received criticism, the gratuitous gift gained in prestige. The presumed unconditionality of divine gifting provides inspiration for corporeal gifting. Inspired by Christic generosity, Irenaeus urges us "not merely to be liberal givers and bestowers, but even that we should present a *gratuitous gift* to those who take away our goods. . . . and from him [sic] that takes away your goods, ask them

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, ch. 18, par. 1, [hereafter Irenaeus, *AH*], in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T. and T. Clark/Wm. B. Eerdmans, no date) [hereafter *ANF*], on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers/ANF-01/iren/iren4.html>> 1 August 2003; also refer to *AH*, Bk. IV, ch. 18, par. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Tatian, *Address of Tatian to the Greeks*, ch. 4, trans J. E. Ryland, in *ANF*, on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-02/anf02-37.htm#P1114\\_299739](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-02/anf02-37.htm#P1114_299739)> 1 August 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Minucius Felix, *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, ch. 32, in *ANC*, on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers/ANF-04/Origen/9/t36.htm>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>18</sup> Arnobius, *The Seven Books of Arnobius Against the Heathen*, Bk. VII, par. 8, in *ANF*, on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-06/anf06-140.htm#P8283\\_2607320](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-06/anf06-140.htm#P8283_2607320)> 1 August 2003.

<sup>19</sup> John Chrysostom, *HM*, "Homily 8," § 1, in *PNF*, on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-10/npnf1-10-14.htm>> 1 August 2003.

*not again.*" <sup>20</sup> In the anonymously written *The Pastor of Hermas* (second century), we are also encouraged to "Give to all, for God wishes His gifts to be shared amongst all . . . not hesitating as to whom he should give and to whom he should not give." <sup>21</sup> Human gifting is encouraged to imitate the liberality and indiscriminateness of divine gifting.

The astutely realistic Tertullian (155-225) observes: "Now there is no one who, when bestowing a gift on another, does not act with a view to *his own interest or the other's*. This conduct, however, *cannot be worthy of the Divine Being . . .*" <sup>22</sup> For Tertullian, unconditional gifting is possible for the deity but impossible for humans. Nevertheless, in the effort to strive for a more divine-like gifting, Tertullian resists the strictly circular gift: "On the monthly day, if he [the member of the church] likes, each puts in a *small donation*; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for *there is no compulsion; all is voluntary.*" <sup>23</sup> Echoing Paul, Tertullian stresses a voluntary gifting in order to exceed its circularity.

Recalling Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) claims that "a gift is 'an unreturnable giving' . . ." <sup>24</sup> If a gift is by its very nature "unreturnable," it thereby defies circularity. However, Aquinas is also realistic when considering the possibility that divine gifting defies the conditionality marking human gifting: "But to give, *not from any advantage expected from the gift*, but out of sheer goodness and the fitness of giving, is an act of Liberality. God therefore is in the highest degree liberal; and, as

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, *AH*, Bk. IV, ch. 13, par. 3, in *ANF*, on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-62.htm>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>21</sup> *Pastor of Hermas*, Bk II.2, in *ANF*, on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-02/anf02-12.htm>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Tertullian, *To the Heathen*, Bk. II, ch. 13, in *ANF*, on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-16.htm#P1584\\_589379](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-16.htm#P1584_589379)> 1 August 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Tertullian, *The Apology*, ch. 39, in *ANF*, on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-05.htm#P253\\_53158](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-05.htm#P253_53158)> 1 August 2003; also refer to *The Five Books Against Marcion*, Bk. IV, ch. 9 [hereafter Tertullian, *FB*], on *NA* <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/03124.htm>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II.1.68 ("Of the Gifts"), Benziger Bros. ed. (1947) [hereafter Aquinas, *ST*], on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FS/FS068.html>> 1 August 2003. On the relationship between Aquinas and his Greek and Arabian predecessors on the question of creation, refer to Pegis, *STG*.

Avicenna says, He alone can properly be called liberal: for every other agent but Him is in the way of *gaining something by his action and intends so to gain*.<sup>25</sup> Like Tertullian, Aquinas is suspicious of the possibility of unconditional gifting; however, the purity of such gifting has surely influenced the way we perceive and perform gifting today: we expect the gift to be given "out of sheer goodness."

The Aristotelian-Thomist notion of unreturnability is also expressed in the thought of Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Mothe Guyon (a.k.a. Madame Guyon) (1647-1717). Writing in relation to dedicating one's life to God, Guyon reminds us: "remember, a gift once presented, is no longer at the disposal of the donor. Abandonment is a matter of the greatest importance . . ." <sup>26</sup> The idea of unreturnability belongs to the series of theological moments that move away from the circular gifting exemplified in the First Testament: the gift should not return; it should be abandoned.

In sum, archival theology sometimes refers to the gift's circularity (e.g., Bunyan, Murray); sometimes the gift is figured in terms of its gratuity and linearity (e.g., Tatian, Felix, Arnobius, Aquinas, Guyon); and, sometimes, theologians refer to both aspects (e.g., Irenaeus, Tertullian, Chrysostom). However, archival theology does not explicitly reflect on the aporeticity of the gift that generates these divergent renderings, even though theology differentiates between divine gratuity and human self-interest. In the twentieth century, however, the gift finally begins to be thought in terms of its aporeticity.

## 2.2 TWENTIETH CENTURY THOUGHTS ON GIFTING

The above overview of the most important moments in archival theology in relation to gifts other than grace not only locates the theological allusions to

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, An Annotated Translation (With some Abridgement) of the Summa Contra Gentiles*, ed. Joseph Rickaby (London: Burns and Oates, 1905), Bk. 1, § 93, on the Jacques Maritain Center website, University of Notre Dame, Indiana <[http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc1\\_93.htm](http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc1_93.htm)> 1 August 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Mothe Guyon, *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer*, ch. 6, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/g/guyon/prayer/prayer.rt>> 1 August 2003.

unconditional gifting, but also intimates the (surprising) lack of sustained attention by theology to this question. This question certainly attracted much more attention in the twentieth century, particularly with the appearance of Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* (c. 1924). This monumental anthropological work would spur on a variety of studies—including Derrida's philosophical investigation.<sup>27</sup>

The burgeoning interest in the gift extended to Christian theology. Three of the most important Christian thinkers of gifting are Schmitz, Webb, and Marion. Their work is analyzed in terms of the gift-aporia and how they engage with the tension between the gift's excess and exchange. I begin with Schmitz's work as it appears in *The Gift: Creation* (§ 2.2.1). I focus on the way Schmitz engages with the gift's tension. This is followed by an examination of Webb's *The Gifting God*, focusing on his treatment of the questions of squandering and gratitude (§ 2.2.3), before examining how he negotiates the gift's aporeticity according to a trinitarian framework (§ 2.2.3). I also discuss Marion's reflections on the gift according to his reading of the parable of the prodigal in *God Without Being* (§ 2.2.4). The final section is a critique of Webb's critique of Marion's emphasis on excess (§ 2.2.5).

### 2.2.1 Schmitz On Gifts And Presents

Schmitz's *The Gift: Creation* is a very rare thing: a diminutive but scholarly theological work explicitly devoted to the question of creation-as-gift. While Schmitz's text precedes *Given Time*, it is marked by a certain awareness of the paradoxicality of the gift and impressively engages with its tension. In this section, I focus on two elements of this work: the gift's gratuity and its receptivity.

Schmitz identifies gratuity as a first feature of the gift. He declares: "It [the gift] is a free endowment upon another who receives it freely; so that the first mark of a gift is its gratuity."<sup>28</sup> However, the writer immediately acknowledges that the

<sup>27</sup> On the significance of Mauss' work, refer to, e.g., Alan D. Schrift, "Logics of the Gift in Cixous and Nietzsche: Can We Still be Generous?" in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 6.2 (August 2001): 113-123, 113-114.

<sup>28</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 44; also refer to *TGC*, 33, 45.

perfect gift falls short of lived experience: "Of course, we ought not expect to find in the concrete and actual human situation pure interactions of giving and receiving unmixed with other qualities and intentions. The line between a gift and a transaction . . . is eidetically clear enough, but it is not always clear in life itself, nor should we expect it to be."<sup>29</sup> In this passage, Schmitz does not seem to be troubled by the tension in the gift.

Nonetheless, throughout the text, he oscillates between downplaying and pronouncing the entwinement of the pure gift with exchange economy. On the one hand, Schmitz announces: "We have often given a 'gift' because it was expected. *There is, of course, nothing wrong with this . . .*"<sup>30</sup> Consider the expression "of course": this turn of phrase signals Schmitz's oscillation between the gift's two conditions, and it is employed at a number of crucial points throughout the text—twice in the paragraph containing the above-quoted statement. Another passage displays Schmitz's entangled engagement with the gift-aporia:

It is important to remember that there is nothing wrong with the interchange of presents out of mixed motives, for such exchange may well make smooth the pathways of interpersonal, social and even commercial relations. Moreover, not all gifts have to be accepted, anymore than they have to be given. But, if a gift is to reach its maturity, true to type, then it needs to be received with gratitude and not compensated for by a return gift. For all that has just been said, nothing is more customary, of course, than the exchange of gifts.<sup>31</sup>

"For all that has just been said": this is the crux of the aporia: no matter what is said about the gift, discourse can never assuage the play or tension between the gift's aspects of gratuity and return. Hence, despite his apparent acceptance and approval of the economic dimension to the gift, Schmitz nevertheless realizes that this aspect is "not without danger" and "the ease with which innocent 'gifts'

<sup>29</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 45; also refer to *TGC*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 45-46; emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 51-52.

imperceptibly move along a line towards bribery and coercion."<sup>32</sup> Schmitz realizes that the gift may "entrap"; for the gift-giver, the gift may be rejected; and the gift itself (material or symbolic) has an "opacity" (a kind of excess) about it which may alter the relationship between gift-giver and receiver.<sup>33</sup> Regarding the material gift's opacity, Schmitz explains: "For a material thing is not transparent; it is opaque, and that opacity may hide as much or more than it reveals of the intentions of the giver. Its independent substance may contain an unforeseen chain of possible consequents."<sup>34</sup> In this context, the author notes: "For when it is refused, a gift, so to speak, bends back upon the giver . . ."<sup>35</sup> This is precisely the point Derrida makes: the paradox of the gift is that, while the gift attempts to be unconditional and linear, it nevertheless "bends back," returns, circulates—whether the gift is refused or accepted.

Due to his recognition of the gift's tension, Schmitz is willing or forced to distinguish the stronger, unconditional sense of gift from a more transactional one, by utilizing "gift" for the former and "present" for the latter.<sup>36</sup> During a passage which deals with the question of the freedom of the creature to "flaw" God's "original gift," the writer identifies how this contradiction is encapsulated in the German word *Opfer*. "The German word, *Opfer*, catches both meanings, for the creator's love is both an offering and, potentially, a victim."<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Schmitz either overlooks or does not explicitly refer to the contradictory meaning of the *dosis* (Greek for gift/dose/poison) or the *Gift* (German for poison).

During his reflection on gratuity, Schmitz makes the following claim: "If something is given out of gratitude, it is caught in the temper of the gift; but if it is in 'compensation' for something received or expected, then it falls away from the

<sup>32</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 48-50.

<sup>34</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 96-97.

character of the gift towards that of a transaction.<sup>38</sup> Now, even if something is given out of gratitude, it is still a giving which is closer to transacting than gifting, for gratefulness is thankfulness-for-something or appreciation-of-something. Despite first impressions, gratitude is caught up in circularity; of course, compensation is more readily identifiable as economic and is more heavily economic than gratitude. I stress, however, that exchange economy is not therefore derided: what is emphasized is the way in which circularity plays with that which is supposed to exceed circularity—the gift.

What is also interesting to note about this passage (and the text in general) is the vocabulary of degree or moderation which is employed: Schmitz seems to acknowledge the complexity of thinking about the gift, and, accordingly, employs language which reflects gifting's elusiveness for thought. Two examples suffice. First, a gift given out of gratitude is "caught in the temper [spirit] of the gift": the gift is marked by giftness but may not be pure gift. Second, a compensatory gift "falls away from the character of the gift": a gift thoroughly marked by commerce may also *retain a mark of giftness*. As well as utilizing expressions like "caught in the temper" and "falls away from," Schmitz employs terms or phrases like "approach," "more or less," "realize the fullest possibility of the gift," "on the other hand," "nevertheless," and so on.<sup>39</sup> The significance of the employment of this kind of vocabulary becomes apparent during my analysis of Derrida's terminology in "On the Gift" (§ 3.2.3), but one may already note that the paradox of the gift necessitates the utilization of a vocabulary that attempts to engage its tension or play.<sup>40</sup>

Another feature of the gift enunciated by Schmitz is reciprocation, not in terms of a reciprocal gift but "the completion of the gift being given": the gift must

<sup>38</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> For instances of the first three terms and phrases, refer to *TGC*, 46; for "on the other hand," refer to, e.g., *TGC*, 50; for "nevertheless," e.g., *TGC*, 50.

<sup>40</sup> "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney," in Caputo and Scanlon, *GGP*, 54-78, [hereafter Derrida and Marion, *OG*].

not only be offered but also received.<sup>41</sup> The author utilizes the word "receptivity" and this term has less of an economic element to it than does the word "reciprocity." He explains that receptivity precedes reciprocity.<sup>42</sup> Schmitz argues for an active agential receptivity, with all the hallmarks of the classic andro-anthropocentrism which is disavowed elsewhere in the book: "The wax undergoes the imprint of the mold and may be said to 'receive' it; but such passivity is especially characteristic of *physical matter*. A *truly human* mode of receptivity calls for the recipient to rally his [sic] human resources in order to make a good reception."<sup>43</sup>

In the following chapters, the question of passivity is raised in relation to the ways in which the gift precedes human subjectivity. But the question of subjectivity cannot be dismissed: a prior passivity does not entail the erasure of agency: after all, recognition of the gift is one of its two basic elements. While all things of creation may be gifts to themselves and each other, perhaps only humans have the ability to perceive the giftness in/of *pragmata*—albeit all too rarely.<sup>44</sup> Of course, as I noted in my Introduction, the hermeneutical capacity to identify the gift is not meant to be *misunderstood* as a reason for privileging human beings amongst other beings.

### 2.2.2 Webb On Squandering And Gratitude

Unlike Schmitz's text, Webb's *The Gifting God* comes after the Derridean aporetics of gifting: Webb therefore has the hindsight to negotiate the insights of *Given Time*. He accepts the Derridean insistence on the linear *and* circular—and therefore aporetic—nature of gifting.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Webb seems to welcome the in/stability it delivers: "under the influence of deconstructive thought, I see gift

<sup>41</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 47.

<sup>42</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 125, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 47. On Schmitz's critique of anthropocentrism, refer to *TGC*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Webb observes our intermittent perception of the gift: "What is given is a continuation and exemplification of what God is and does at all times, the giving that is a constant with God but only periodically and inadequately perceived by those to whom God gives." Webb, *TGG*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> Refer to Webb, *TGG*, 67-81; also refer to *TGG*, 54, 124, 149.

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<sup>42</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 125, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 47. On Schmitz's critique of anthropocentrism, refer to *TGC*, 34.

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<sup>45</sup> Refer to Webb, *TGG*, 67-81; also refer to *TGG*, 54, 124, 149.

giving as both ordering and disordering reality in unexpected and unsettling ways."<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the author of *The Gifting God* attempts to order and disorder Derrida's own aporetics of gifting by disrupting and developing it in a theological direction. Webb departs from Derrida, nevertheless remaining aware of the contradictory nature of the gift. In other words, Webb attempts to remain faithful to the gift's aporeticity, but nevertheless seeks to exceed it. In this section, I primarily examine Webb's reflections on squandering and gratitude.

Since Webb is an author keenly aware of the gift-aporia, its negotiation lies at the heart of his meditation: "The question is whether giving can embody elements of both excess and exchange at the same time."<sup>47</sup> Hence, *The Gifting God* deals expressly with the problem of the roles of excess (or squandering) and exchange (or gratitude).<sup>48</sup> Webb's desire for syncretism is reinforced in the programmatic statement: "My goal is to show how, in our modern period, these two approaches to giving, excess (or squandering) and exchange (or reciprocity), have become increasingly polarized . . ."<sup>49</sup> In other words, theorizations of gifting have tended to emphasize either gratuity or circularity. This evaluation evokes a number of responses.

To begin with, the present retracing indicates that this polarization is not restricted to modern philosophy: historically, theology has tended to figure the gift according to either one of its two competing aspects. Indeed, the Bible itself casts the gift in extraordinarily contrasting terms—from the gift-bribe to the grace-gift. And so, the polarization of the gift's excess and exchange is not a particularly modern phenomenon. Of course, while any *ana-lysis* (loosening up) of the gift would necessarily distinguish its two basic aspects, what seems to be required is a recognition and exposition of both. And these elements should not be

<sup>46</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 124.

<sup>47</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 9. Whenever Webb utilizes the term "giving," it typically refers to gifting.

<sup>48</sup> Webb often utilizes the terms "squandering" and "gratitude" to refer to the two aspects of gift/ing.

<sup>49</sup> Webb adds: "in most theoretical accounts of giving, excess and exchange are either insufficiently distinguished or completely compartmentalized from each other . . ." *TGG*, 15.

hierarchically bifurcated, for they are equally essential: they require each other. Otherwise, the gift would not be one.

Now, while the gift has historically been overwhelmingly figured in terms of one or the other of its disparate elements, Webb's analyses of some of our most important modern theorizations of the gift certainly reveal the act of polarization. His criticism is most poignant when the focus turns to those thinkers who have figured gifting in terms of gratuity or squandering. First of all, why is "squandering" an important concept in relation to the question of gifting? As it relates to gifting, the *OED* defines "squandering" in the following way(s): "To spend (money, goods, etc.) recklessly, prodigally, or lavishly; to expend extravagantly, profusely, or wastefully. . . . To spend profusely, without securing adequate return; to use in a wasteful manner."<sup>50</sup> The various nuances of "squandering" are determinations of the condition of unconditionality: the gift-giver would gift according to the modes of recklessness, extravagance, waste, profusion, and so on. In another text, Webb notes a relation between the words "squandering" and "gratuitous": the latter "can denote the freely given as well as that which is squandered, wasted, there for no apparent reason."<sup>51</sup> Hence, squandering resists economization. Is gifting therefore squandering?

Webb introduces his chapter on squandering by acknowledging its theological resonance: "Squandering is a kind of giving that denies exchange, and since theology often portrays God as a purely excessive giver, it is important to examine squandering . . ."<sup>52</sup> Recalling the above retracing, this portrayal is confirmed in the

<sup>50</sup> The word "prodigally" is significant: it is referenced (usually in terms of the parable of the prodigal) by a number of the thinkers examined in the present work, and is therefore broached in the present study. It is also worth noting here some of the other *OED* meanings associated with the word "squander": "Of things: To be scattered over a comparatively wide surface or area. Brought to disintegration or dissolution. . . . To drive off in various directions; to cause to scatter or disperse. . . . To roam about; to wander."

<sup>51</sup> Stephen H. Webb, "Nature's Spendthrift Economy: The Extravagance of God in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*," in *Soundings* 77.3-4 (Fall/Winter 1994): 429-451, 433 [hereafter Webb, *NSE*]; also refer to Webb, *TGG*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 46. I discuss the relation between gifting and playing in § 4.2.3, and the question of responsibility (and its relation to indebtedness) is traversed throughout the ensuing chapters, esp. in § 3.2.2 and § 4.2.4.

remarks by thinkers like Tertullian and Aquinas. Webb explores the work of the most profound thinkers of squandering, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Friedrich Nietzsche (and others, such as Georges Bataille.)<sup>53</sup> Webb credits Emerson in the following way: "Emerson wants to free giving from guilt (from response, or responsibility). He characterizes giving as the pleasurable and playful parodying of paying; one act is as free as the other is compelled."<sup>54</sup> Emerson therefore expresses squandering or gifting according to the gratuitous aspect of gifting.

Webb also provides a thoughtful analysis of Nietzschean squandering. Briefly, Webb cites the fact that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins and ends with notions of gifting (the endless gifting of the sun and the generosity of the prophet), and observes the fact that "Zarathustra is almost constantly talking about giving."<sup>55</sup> This giving overflows. The gifting of Nietzsche/Zarathustra entails radical abandon or loss, and is radically distanced from alms and sacrifice. Now, Nietzsche also recognizes the two economies at work in the gift. Squandering is favored from the kind of gifting, which, as Webb phrases it, "is an economy of reserve based on timidity, fear, and prudence."<sup>56</sup> And so, Nietzsche's "celebration of strong giving is not an attempt to purify giving from the machinations of calculation and exchange" but is "a way of turning exchange inward in order to circumvent some of the restrictive implications of mutuality and reciprocity."<sup>57</sup> Rather than the

<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, an examination of the work of these profound thinkers of the gift lies beyond the scope of the thesis. Refer to Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series*, intro. Douglas Crase (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1966) [hereafter Nietzsche, *TSZ*]; *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) [hereafter Nietzsche, *OGM*]; Nietzsche, *WP*; Bataille, *TAS*. For secondary texts on Nietzsche, refer to, e.g., Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving With Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Gary Shapiro, *Alcyon: Nietzsche on Gifts, Noise, and Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>54</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 56.

<sup>55</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 59.

<sup>56</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 62.

<sup>57</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 62.

irresponsibility implied by the word "squandering," this kind of gifting is demanding—indeed, "a gift-giving virtue is the greatest virtue."<sup>58</sup>

Despite the emphatic foregrounding of excess by the likes of Emerson and Nietzsche, Webb rightly criticizes these thinkers insofar as their thinking of gifting falls prey to the modernist preoccupation and amplification of the subject's autonomy. Webb recognizes Emerson's giving as too self-ish: "Giving is a form of creation, but instead of creating something other (as in the Genesis account), for Emerson, giving creates only the self."<sup>59</sup> And Nietzsche's self-sufficient gift-giver resembles the deity of old who gifts or creates strictly *ex nihilo*. By an incisive act of inversion, Webb sounds the death knell for Nietzsche's squandering *Übermensch*: "the squanderer begins to look suspiciously similar to the God whom Nietzsche has pronounced dead."<sup>60</sup> Webb explains: "The overman [sic], like God in the traditional theology of creation, does not so much give as create; what he gives is a new and original act that is not responsive to a prior giving and not intended to engender bonds of mutuality and support. Such giving must be *ex nihilo*, a free, spontaneous, gratuitous event."<sup>61</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, Nietzschean squandering is also questionable. Webb argues that even Nietzschean squandering suffers from the logic of a capitalizing exchange economy: "The economics of squandering must be planned, arranged, and managed so that power is maximized."<sup>62</sup> Finally, Nietzschean squandering ends up being exceedingly circular; as Zarathustra himself proclaims: "What returns, what finally, comes home to me, is my own self."<sup>63</sup> Emersonian and

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche, *TSZ*, "On the Gift-Giving Virtue," § 1, 74.

<sup>59</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 58. Marion also opposes a self-interested squandering: "giving with abandon. . . . should not be confused with spending wildly, which can do nothing more than serve the interests of the spender." *BG*, 86.

<sup>60</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 61; also refer to Wallace, *FS*, 60, esp. n. 59.

<sup>61</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 61. As I have noted above, any simplistic version of the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* is biblically and ecologically problematic.

<sup>62</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 64.

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *TSZ*, 264; in Webb, *TGG*, 65.

Nietzschean squandering become entangled in the gift-aporia: these versions of squandering are as economical as they are excessive.

By acknowledging some of the more excessive (severe) elements of the ways in which squandering has been theorized, does Webb thereby reject the notion of squandering? He tempers any extreme figuring of squandering—though one may ask whether there is any other kind—by introducing the question of gratitude into his discourse. The author attentively notes gratitude's affirmative *and* negative characteristics (under the subheading "Against Gratitude"). First, Webb cites what are, for him, positive aspects to gratitude and some of its social expressions:

Gratitude is diffuse: it is the opportunity to recognize any external priority, from the debt of our birth to the aid of all those institutions that make us what we are. . . . Gratitude thus signifies various kinds of dependence and obligation, from bondage to praise and even worship. It can be an aspect of a vague attitude or intense emotion, or it can be organized in value systems, elaborate rituals, and daily, habitual activities.<sup>64</sup>

Note the nature of gratitude: it is a "recognition" of a prior-ity. This recognition marks the circularity of the gift but also its possibility: without recognition there would be no perception of the gift. With the recognition of the gift its gratuity is undone—this is its very aporia. But the circularity of the gift is starkly expressed in the phrase "the debt of our birth": the recognition of our birth-as-gift is marked by indebtedness. Note, too, the reference to religious indebtedness: "dependence and obligation, from bondage to praise and even worship." Religion binds: the religious are indebted to the divine. Webb also cites various modes of gratitude: from "a vague attitude or intense emotion" to "value systems, elaborate rituals, and daily, habitual activities."

Having described gratitude in the logic and language of exchange, Webb also offers an argument that attempts to indicate a somewhat *anti*-circular dimension to

<sup>64</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 49; also refer to Webb, 46.

gratitude: "Gratitude is a substitute for the counter-gift, the promise of a return that would not be a return, that is, the promise of further, commensurate gifts. . . . [I]t [gratitude] vows future action based on imagination and reflection, not automatic equivalence."<sup>65</sup> Does gratitude in fact exceed pure and simple exchange? First, note the phrase "Gratitude is a substitute for the counter-gift": what is *substitution* if not a form of exchange? To substitute is to exchange (or vice versa).<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, even though gratitude may be deemed a "poor" or "inadequate" return, it is nevertheless a return: equivalency needn't be a condition for transaction. (Certainly, the logic of capitalism does not require "equivalence"—on the contrary, it thrives on *surplus*.) The circular nature of gratitude is admitted by Webb himself: gratitude is a substitute or exchange for that most obvious object of perfect reciprocity, the counter-gift.

The most fascinating part of the above-quoted statement, however, has to do with the notion that gratitude or indebtedness is a return-without-return because it is mediated by time (it is futural, non-automatic). A similar argument is provided by John Milbank in the essay "Can a Gift Be Given?"<sup>67</sup> However, as Horner convincingly explains, delay only delays the circularity of gifting without effacing it.<sup>68</sup> As is the case with incommensurability, delay does *not* disrupt exchange economy. Horner succinctly sums up the convincing case against unequal trade and temporal delay as measures to interrupt the economization of gifting: "The incorporation of the elements of difference and delay do not solve this problem. If

<sup>65</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 51; also refer to *TGG*, 93.

<sup>66</sup> According to the *Bloomsbury Thesaurus*, "exchange" and "substitution" are synonymous; *Bloomsbury Thesaurus*, ed. John Daintith and others (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1993), 323-324.

<sup>67</sup> John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," in *Rethinking Metaphysics*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephen E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 119-161 [hereafter Milbank, *CGG*].

<sup>68</sup> Horner, *TGG*, 17-18, 125, 193. Also refer to Derrida, *GT*, 38f, where he discusses the notion of delay in Mauss's work.

the gift returns in a different measure or kind or after some delay, it still undoes itself, for it can always be the result of a need for a certain circularity . . .”<sup>69</sup>

Gratitude does not undo that which undoes the gift, for gratitude itself undoes it. Webb is aware of this aporia: while having figured the possibility that gratitude resists economization, he nevertheless acknowledges its problematic nature: “Gratitude is a kind of expected gift, something that earns credit when adequately supplied, which raises all sorts of puzzles. The question immediately arises whether gratitude should be expressed at all.”<sup>70</sup> Now, gratitude may certainly be understood as a counter-gift: it is given when a gift is received. In our everyday gifting, gratitude usually seems to be anticipated, so Webb is correct in asserting that gratitude may be “a kind of expected gift.”

Gratitude therefore marks gifting with exchange—herein lies the conundrum of the gift. In the context of its perplexing nature, Webb offers the ostensibly perplexing possibility: “whether gratitude should be expressed at all.” This question may be generalized: which responses, if any, *should* be expressed? Which leads to a further question that will only be presented (rather than engaged) at this stage: which responses, if any, would be *ecological*?

### 2.2.3 Webb On Divine And Human Gifting

What is the relation between Webb’s theology and his recognition of the paradoxical nature of gifting? Webb is keen to preserve the paradoxical elements of gifting, even though such a task “can be extremely difficult.”<sup>71</sup> Webb notes the theologically subversive—as well as conservative—effect of thinking gifting: “Gift

<sup>69</sup> Horner, RGG, 17-18. Horner cautiously acknowledges that “there is something to be said for [Milbank’s] argument” and that she finds his pragmatism “appealing.” However, according to Horner, Milbank’s affirmation of gift-exchange “forces us to maintain an inherent contradiction in the word ‘gift’ . . .”

<sup>70</sup> Webb, TGG, 52. Elsewhere, Webb claims that “Gratitude is a static notion, an uneasy response to a giving that should not or cannot be returned or passed along.” TGG, 92.

<sup>71</sup> Webb, TGG, 31; also refer to TGG, 30, 49, 71, 148.

giving provides an important perspective to challenge the classical model of theism because it both continues and undermines many aspects of the traditional pairing of the divine gratuity and our gratitude.”<sup>72</sup>

So how does Webb attempt to overcome the persistent bias towards one or the other element of gifting? He intends to maintain the tension by applying a nuanced trinitarian framework: “Excess and exchange need to be conceived, in a Chalcedonian manner, as separate and yet one, different and cohering aspects of one dynamic, threefold process.”<sup>73</sup> Webb’s Chalcedonian theology rethinks gifting in terms of the three personae of the Trinitarian God. First, by determining the first Person of the Trinity as Giver, Webb emphasizes that gifting precedes what-is. The author expresses it starkly: God “creates our giving.”<sup>74</sup> Immemorial expenditure inspires and accommodates corporeal gratuity and return: “Only a giving that begins with an original and abundant gift and aims at a community of mutual givers can be both extravagant and reciprocal.”<sup>75</sup> There is no doubt that this sentiment could be developed eco/theo/logically: divine gifting aims at a “community of mutual givers” that includes other-than-human givers. God gifts to all of creation so that all of creation may gift to each other.

However, a number of problems immediately arise in the context of the present aporetics. First, the notion that God “creates our giving” may be linked to the idea of creation *ex nihilo*: God creates every-thing, including gift/ing itself. This possibility risks marginalizing the possibility of co-creation, and co-creativity problematizes the notion of a prior giving that gifts corporeal gifting. Second, immemorial gifting “aims at” (Webb’s phrase) something else, that is, the continuation of the process of gifting: there is an aim, an intention.<sup>76</sup> While intention is a necessary element of gifting (as Derrida acknowledges), divine gifting

<sup>72</sup> Webb, TGG, 88.

<sup>73</sup> Webb, TGG, 139.

<sup>74</sup> Webb, TGG, 140.

<sup>75</sup> Webb, TGG, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Schmitz also proposes a purposiveness to divine creativity; TGC, 19.

is here figured according to exchange, even though the aim is a noble one (creaturely gifting). Divine gratuity becomes purposeful: can such gratuity remain gratuitous?

Third, divine priority opens up the possibility of indebtedness, and this sentiment is offered by Webb himself: "The theological circle of giving—the church, inasmuch as it continues and galvanizes God's giving—is, in principle, unlimited and open. To enter into this circle is to acknowledge a debt that takes the form of a prior giving that carries one forward into more giving."<sup>77</sup> This passage is obviously marked by the logic of exchange, even though Webb qualifies this mercantilism by stating that the circle is "unlimited and open"—like a spiral. Nonetheless, this passage *confirms* the element of exchange in gifting. The question of debt is raised throughout *The Gifting God*. Early on in the text, Webb announces that one of the tasks of theology is "to awaken us to a greater magnitude of debt, a more original and amazing donation, and hence a higher order of gratitude."<sup>78</sup> Webb calculates our religious arrears at the end of the text: "Christians are in debt not just to God . . ."<sup>79</sup>

To be sure, Webb oscillates between an emphasis on gratitude or indebtedness and excess. In the previous section, I discussed Webb's convincing critique of human squandering. Webb nevertheless encourages squandering, basing our gifting on divine squandering; he urges: "I argue that God wants us to give excessively, beyond the requirements of utility, because that is the nature of giving, and this giving is what God needs and desires in order to be all that God can be."<sup>80</sup> This sentiment is attractive in its articulation of a desirous deity (undoubtedly closer to the passionate God of the Bible than philosophy's unmoved Mover), as well as finding a place for excessive giving. The only problem with this statement is that our gifting would be goal-driven: we should squander because God needs it.

<sup>77</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 147.

<sup>80</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 87.

Webb's theology of squandering becomes entangled further on in the text: on one page, Webb determines that "God's gifting is not random or reckless . . ." and yet, one page later, God does indeed perform "reckless giving."<sup>81</sup> Webb's text oscillates—in spite of itself. The author's stress on divine squandering paradoxically generates a theology of indebtedness. Webb certainly recognizes that Christian gifting does not escape exchange economy. He acknowledges: "Being a Christian means being implicated in a kind of economy, a structure of demands and benefits—a covenant."<sup>82</sup> Webb seems to come full circle: on the one hand, Christians are supposed to emulate divine squandering; on the other hand, Christian gift-givers participate in a covenant—an exchange economy. While attempting to figure Christian gift/ing in terms of excess, Webb ends up emphasizing its circularity.

Turning to the second person of the Trinity, Webb notes how the Christ-gift may be the paradigmatic act of gifting: "Jesus' death has come to signify the ultimate act of giving. Giving is a kind of relinquishing or undoing that prepares us for death, a letting go or giving up that enables us to give in to our finitude with hope and courage. Every gift is both a death and a rebirth, simultaneously the loss and return of the self."<sup>83</sup> Webb prudently incorporates both aspects of gifting (loss and return) in his gift-christology. The messianic sacrifice oscillates between excess and exchange: "Although the cross connects giving to losing, it does not suggest that [Christian] squandering is a fruitless self-denial aimed at some otherworldly reward. . . . [W]e give because we already have been given too much. . . . Jesus Christ reveals both the futility and the fecundity of the gift."<sup>84</sup> Of course, one may argue that Webb leans towards exchange when he states: "We give *because* we already have been given too much": there is a reason behind gifting—even though

<sup>81</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 140, 141.

<sup>82</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 127.

<sup>83</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 143.

<sup>84</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 144.

this reason is excess itself. After all, gratuitous gifting, by definition, needs no reason.

Webb also correlates the Holy Spirit with gift/ing. The third person of the Trinity denotes the dynamism of the gift: "Our giving is not governed by the logic of compensation and return but by the desire to follow the essential dynamic of all gifts, which is *to return them to their origin*, in God, by giving them to others."<sup>85</sup> Once again, circularity marks this aspect of the trinitarian model of gifting: even when disseminated according to the logic of a divine economy, gifts nevertheless are figured in terms of return and origin.

What is the crux of Webb's trinitarian theology? He himself declares: "I want to argue that divine gift giving is both excessive and reciprocal, or rather, it is reciprocal precisely because it is excessive. . . . My governing insight, then, is the following: *divine excess begets reciprocity*. Without excess, reciprocity becomes calculation, bartering, exchange; without reciprocity, excess becomes irrelevant, anarchic, and wasteful."<sup>86</sup> Webb correctly identifies and maintains the inherent tension in gifting.<sup>87</sup> However, does his insight clarify the aporia, or does it intensify it? After all, how and why should excess beget reciprocity? One would expect that excess, by definition, would seek nothing, ask for nothing. Webb concedes that the purportedly divine logic in which "God receives in order to give again" is a "strange economy" and that this "giving by returning" does "defy our desires and expectations."<sup>88</sup> Now, one may expect the unexpected from divinity, but do not these statements acknowledge the fact that any thinking of divine gifting obscures—rather than *clarifies*—our thinking of corporeal gifting? In other words, it seems Webb's text conceals more than it reveals. At the very least, Webb's theology of gifting seems to magnify the aporeticity of gifting—whether human or divine. Of course, magnifying the gift-aporia is certainly not a bad thing.

<sup>85</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 93; emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 90.

<sup>87</sup> Webb also affirms the tension in gifting in *NSE*, esp. 431-432.

<sup>88</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 93.

One also confronts the problem of analogy in *The Gifting God*. Early on in the text, Webb instructs: "God's giving must be correlated to our own practices of exchange and reciprocity, yet this correlation cannot be strict or exact."<sup>89</sup> This statement correctly reflects theological kataphaticism (positive predication, correlation) and apophaticism (negativity, distance). And yet, this moderate position masks a number of problems. First, a radical apophaticism opens up the possibility that there may be no correlation between divine and human gifting. *If* this is the case, then divine gifting would not be "correlated to our own practices of exchange and reciprocity." After all, divine gifting may be neither unilateral nor reciprocal—as unthinkable or indescribable as this third way would be. Any correlation (even a lax one) presupposes an ability to comprehend divine gift/ing. Perhaps deities gift like we do—but perhaps not: any possible correlation must therefore be marked by undecidability.

Of course, I do not suggest that the possibility of correlation should be rejected outright: such a rejection would deny the possibility and undecidability of correlationality, and would concede too much to apophaticism, especially if one has faith in a biblical God who calls forth divinely-imaged beings. One should therefore oscillate between kataphasis and apophasis. Accordingly, there is a certain legitimacy in attempting to pursue, as Webb does, a theology of gifting whose insights may be transposed to worldly gifting. But despite the fact that Webb acknowledges the inability for a consistently coherent account of gifting, he nevertheless stresses: "Being clear about how God gives is of the utmost importance."<sup>90</sup> This aim is stipulated in a chapter ambitiously titled "How Gifting Works." The need for clarity runs contrary to Webb's recognition of the perplexity of this question: he now proposes that *clarity* may be achieved when considering

<sup>89</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 11.

<sup>90</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 139. Elsewhere, Webb declares: "We need to know how giving—properly understood and practiced as that which precedes that which is and thus who we are—can free us from the obsessive desire to secure and save our existence at the cost of others, to own ourselves before we give, to place our own being before God's giving. In other words, we still need to know what giving does, or how giving works. Webb, *TGG*, 133.

*divine* gifting—a gifting which, when related to the grace-gift, is, according to Paul, “indescribable.” A few pages later, Webb recognizes the ultimate elusiveness of the question of the gift: “A desire for the other overfunded by the reckless giving of the Ultimate Other is a point worth trying to make, even as that very point unmakes and confounds all of our attempts to grasp what we can never reach and to speak what we can never know.”<sup>91</sup> Rather than working out how the gift works, Webb—and all of us—end up being worked or played ourselves by the gift-aporia.

#### 2.2.4 Marion On The Gift And The Prodigal

A third and ostensibly most important Christian thinker of the gift is Marion: he has engaged with the question of the gift for many years. He has negotiated this question on two fronts, theological and phenomenological. Webb appraises Marion’s theological deployment of the figure of the gift: “Jean-Luc Marion has most consistently pursued the possibility of defining God in terms of giving (the Christian notion of charity and agape) rather than Being (the most general metaphysical idea and thus the foundation of philosophy).”<sup>92</sup> In the present subsection, I examine his theological recourses to the gift as they occur in his books *The Idol and Distance* and *God Without Being* (§ 2.2.4). The subsequent subsection discusses Webb’s critique of Marion’s theological treatment of the gift (§ 2.2.5), while I devote the first section of the next chapter to Marion’s radical philosophical figuration of the gift (§ 3.1).

Now, Marion’s preoccupation with the gift is evidenced in early theological works, including *The Idol and Distance* and *God Without Being*. *The Idol and Distance* is composed of a series of meditations on the notion of “distance”: the “undefinable” divide between the divine and the human, in which “alterity alone allows communion” and wherein “incommensurability alone makes intimacy possible

<sup>91</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 141.

<sup>92</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 129.

...”<sup>93</sup> The word “gift” is recalled repeatedly in the second half of the book, but the author does not offer a detailed account of how this concept and phenomenon is figured in the context of a reflection on distance.

Nonetheless, *The Idol and Distance* verifies the tension in the gift between gratuity and exchange. On the one hand, the quality of gratuity and excess is associated with gifting. Marion proposes: “proximity perhaps is not to be seized like a good to be stored away, but to be received, like a gift in which distance remains irreducible just as much as presence there delivers itself without return.”<sup>94</sup> Abandon and gift are two movements of distance.<sup>95</sup> *Kenosis* (self-emptying) is “unconditional gift.”<sup>96</sup>

On the other hand, Marion emphasizes the circularity of the gift. He refers to “the circulation of the gift . . .”<sup>97</sup> While moving away from an explicitly economic gift (“investment, “dispossession”), Marion nevertheless inscribes return in the gift: “Alone among the gods, the Christ experiences his divinity less as an investment or a dispossession [a very economical kind of gift] than as the freedom of a gift *received from the Father and returned*.”<sup>98</sup> With regard to the scriptural gift, Marion insists: “the *logia* [the Bible] should actually be received as gifts. And therefore be returned to the giver.”<sup>99</sup> Apparently, the gift of *The Idol and Distance* swings between the two polarities of un/conditionality.

The basic aim of *God Without Being* is “To think God without any conditions . . .”<sup>100</sup> The book brilliantly exposes and humbles the human pretension to

<sup>93</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. and intro. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) 199 [hereafter Marion, *ID*]. (Originally published as *L'idole et la distance*. Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1977.)

<sup>94</sup> Marion, *ID*, 104.

<sup>95</sup> Marion, *ID*, 113.

<sup>96</sup> Marion, *ID*, 215.

<sup>97</sup> Marion, *ID*, 166.

<sup>98</sup> Marion, *ID*, 109; emphasis added.

<sup>99</sup> Marion, *ID*, 180.

<sup>100</sup> Marion, *GWB*, 45.

conceptually mastering God via recourse to Being. This book also offers a somewhat clearer picture of the ways in which Marion thinks the gift. His reflection on the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15.12-32) crosses this question in all its perplexity.<sup>101</sup> The word "gift" is repeatedly brought into play—fifteen times in the most significant passage.<sup>102</sup>

Marion argues that the younger son already had access to his father's goods: "The son, in the role of heir . . . already had the use and enjoyment of them ["goods" or "property"]."<sup>103</sup> But was this really the case? Marion concedes that "this enjoyment did not strictly coincide with possession, nor this usage with disposability: between one and the other term intervened an irreducible authority, the father." Evidently, a condition imposes itself over these goods: the authority of the father. A question immediately comes to mind: should the gift come with strings attached? When a gift-giver gifts some thing to an other, should the former retain an "irreducible authority" over the gift? Certainly, these kinds of questions would be answered in the negative when confronted with the thought of the pure or perfect gift: the gift would be gift-ed without condition, without retention of authority.

Marion's conceptualization of the gift as conditional becomes more acute as his contemplation proceeds. Now, while the father's giving was given with generosity (the father gives immediately and without discussion), the son nevertheless wants to possess his share, but not to "owe that share of *ousia* . . ." Marion goes on:

He [the son] asks to possess it [his *ousia* or share of the goods], dispose of it, enjoy it without passing through the gift and the reception of the gift. The son wants to owe nothing to his father, and above all not to

<sup>101</sup> The primary aim of Marion's contemplation of the parable is to destabilize and exceed the ontological difference (Being/beings) by recourse to the gift, rather than a sustained contemplation on the gift *per se*.

<sup>102</sup> Marion, *GW/B*, 97-98.

<sup>103</sup> Marion; *GW/B*, 97; until stated otherwise, the subsequent citations are drawn from this page.

owe him a gift; he asks to have a father no longer—the *ousia* without the father or the gift. The *ousia* becomes the full possession of the son only to the extent that it is fully dispossessed of the father: dispossession of the father, annulment of the gift, this is what possession of *ousia* implies. . . . [T]he possession that censures the gift integrates within itself, indissolubly, the waste of the gift . . ."<sup>104</sup>

This passage elicits a number of responses. First, Marion's recurring employment of the word "owe" heightens the economic tone of Marion's discourse in relation to the gift. But must the gift be owed? One assumes that the gift is perhaps one of the few things in life that should *not* be owed: by definition, the gift would be that which is *not* owed but rather given gratuitously and without condition. For the gift to remain freely given, the language of exchange should be excluded—as the Derridean thinking of gifting starkly reveals. It seems Marion's text exemplifies the gift's entanglement with economics. And so, one must ponder: if we owe the father/mother/other, can we still call what we are given *a gift*? Doesn't the gratuity of the gift entail cutting the ties that bind? Can one enjoy a gift but still feel indebted? In the above passage, Marion seems to want to hold onto a familial debt.<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, does Marion's theological text subscribe here to the notion that we "creatures" owe a gift-giver for the gift-of-creation? Turning this question on its head: does the gift-giver (if there is any) want to be *owed*? Once again (and paradoxically), the question of debt arises. Briefly (for I return to this question in the following chapters), one may turn to the thoughts offered by Horner: she professes (in response to the argument by John Milbank (cited in § 2.2.2) who stresses the circularity of gifting): "But I cannot believe in a God who obliges my belief, and similarly, a God who constantly places me in debt seems not particularly

<sup>104</sup> Marion, *GW/B*, 97-98. It is important to recognize the fact that the word "annulment" does not necessarily or primarily mean destruction; refer to *GW/B*, 95. The sense of annulment as an *undoing* seems to transpose itself to a Derridean treatment of the gift, for Derrida does not simply seek to *destroy* the possibility of gifting.

<sup>105</sup> For Mark C. Taylor, the "prodigal neither returns nor demands a return." *Er*, 159.

loving."<sup>106</sup> In the conclusion to the meticulously argued *Rethinking God as Gift*, Horner pronounces: "if there is any good news, then the good news is that we owe God nothing, that God's (is) a gift that is really free . . ."<sup>107</sup> While Marion's above-quoted text is figured in mercantile language, and signals a divine exchange economy (that is, creaturely daughters and sons somehow owe "the f/Father"), Horner (following Derrida) moves away from the debt-ridden mode of gifting and religiosity towards a debt-free (or at least *freer*) receptivity.

Another important response elicited by the above-quoted passage is the question of squandering, signaled here by the names of "dispossession," "waste," "expenditure," and "dissipation."<sup>108</sup> I re-cite the way in which the transaction is framed by Marion: "dispossession of the father, annulment of the gift, this is what possession of *ousia* implies. . . . [T]he possession that censures the gift integrates within itself, indissolubly, the waste of the gift . . ." Marion adds:

Henceforth orphan of the paternal gift, *ousia* finds itself possessed in the mode of dissipation. . . . Landed property, now without ground, becomes liquid money. . . . The reason for the concrete dissipation of *ousia* is found in a first and fundamental dissipation: the transformation of the *ousia* into liquid (money), which itself results from the abandonment of the paternal gift as place, meaning, and legitimacy of the enjoyment of the *ousia*.

Following an economic reading of the gift, this passage makes sense: there is a feeling here of losing the gift, of having the gift abandoned, as its liquidity slips through our fingers. There is a sense here of losing the gift's "place, meaning, and legitimacy." But has the gift a "place," a "meaning," and a "legitimacy"? On the way to approaching this kind of question (an approach in which the place of the gift may also account for its logic and legitimacy), it is fascinating to note Marion's

<sup>106</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 17.

<sup>107</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 247.

<sup>108</sup> Marion, *GIWB*; 98; until stated otherwise, the subsequent citations are drawn from this page.

remark that the gift's "dispersed dissipation" occurs in a "great 'region,' or rather *khôra*, an empty and undetermined space, where meaning even more than food, has disappeared." Why is the identification of the *khôra* fascinating? According to a Derridean aporetic of gifting, *khôra* is *precisely* the non-place where gifting may take place: the gift is "atopical"—without location and therefore "the extraordinary, the unusual, the strange, the extravagant, the absurd, the mad."<sup>109</sup> There even seems to be a certain equivalence—or, more cautiously: a certain relation—between the gift and *khôra*, for Derrida proposes that the gift "sets off its [the circle's] motion" and that—perhaps hyperbolically-speaking—the gift is a kind of "first mover of the circle."<sup>110</sup> In quasi-Derridean terms, quasi-transcendental *khôra* "gifts" or possibilizes both gifting and the circularity that undoes it.<sup>111</sup>

If *khôra* gifts gifting—or, more accurately: possibilizes it—then does gifting thereby have a meaning and a legitimacy? To answer this question satisfactorily, one would have to explore and follow the variety of meanings inscribed by complex terms like "meaning" and "legitimacy." However, as I noted above, a Derridean gift-aporetic indicates and highlights why the gift resists rationalization, why the two values of gift and exchange are a "visible contradiction," why the gift entails immoderation, and why the gift exceeds justification, compensation, guarantee, calculation, and profit. According to the gift's excess, the gift would, by definition, exceed meaning and legitimation.

And so, according to this "logic" of gifting, one may surmise that Derrida would affirm that which Marion states negatively, critically: "orphan," "abandonment," "dispossession," "dissipation," etc., may be a "proper" glossary for the gift, properly figuring the inappropriate figure of the gift. The atopical and mad character of the gift should be affirmed. One is thereby left with a paralyzing dilemma: should the gift be abandoned, or should it be returned? Does the gift

<sup>109</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 35.

<sup>110</sup> Refer to Horner's commentary on this intriguing passage—intriguing precisely because Derrida refers to a "first mover"—in *RGG*, 189-190.

<sup>111</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 35; also refer to Derrida's comments in Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 73. Horner writes about a "*khôral* gift," *RGG*, 237.

have a place (identification) or a non-place (*kebôra*)? Is it “legitimate” (calculated, owed) or “illegitimate” (orphaned, dispossessed)?

### 2.2.5 Webb On Marion’s Excess

As a part of his reflection on the gift, Webb engages with Marion’s treatment of this question. Having praised Marion’s emphasis on the gift’s transgression of being, Webb nevertheless observes:

In his rush to contrast giving [gifting] and being, however, Marion is also indifferent to the differences in giving itself. He pushes God’s excess so far that the gift analogy is stretched out of recognizable shape . . . . God’s giving obliterates any sign of either a given or a receipt. God’s giving is not a process but a singular act that defies our understanding and resists our participation. At best, through gratitude we can glimpse the infinite distance breached by this abundant giving, which is totally different from and thus unrelated to the divine excess. Just as giving opposes being, for Marion, excess is unrelated to reciprocity. What cannot be understood can be received but not returned.<sup>112</sup>

To begin with, it is somewhat ironic that Webb criticizes Marion for his strong bias towards excess and how this relates to the relation (or non/relation) between divine and mortal gifting, when I have just examined the circularity in Marion’s theological thinking of the gift. However, as I noted at the beginning of this subsection, Marion’s theology is radical in its ambition to emphasize divine excess (distance, otherness, difference), which does not eliminate the possibility of a more conservative approach to the gift, as is demonstrated by Marion’s reflection on the prodigal.

Now, Webb’s criticism warrants a variety of responses: some validate Marion’s stance; others confirm Webb’s concerns. First, any thinker who attends to

<sup>112</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 132.

the limits of human thinking should be applauded—especially where the divine is concerned. The possibility that divine gifting “defies our understanding and resists our participation” is welcomed in an aporetic that attempts to contribute to the resistance against excessive epistemic and technological mastery. Hence, Marion’s insistence on distance is admirable—and Webb himself acknowledges this insight.

Second, it is difficult to reason against the position that “excess is unrelated to reciprocity”: by definition, these two concepts are antithetical. But this is why the gift is an aporia: its antithesis is structurally internal to it. Hence, Marion remains rigorous in his insistence that the conditional and the unconditional remain mutually exclusive.

Third, Webb’s vocabulary of opposition (“giving opposes being”) may be misleading: Marion seeks to *differentiate* the one from the other. He does not argue that gifting is *opposed* to being in any kind of polemical sense: it is *prior* to it; it *gifts* it. It is a question of prior-ity and difference—not opposition. Of course, Marion’s passion for excess may be interpreted as a kind of theological “degradation” of being, but this kind of mis/interpretation obscures Marion’s fundamental insight: that thinking God would exceed the thinking of being.

Nevertheless, I share Webb’s concerns on three basic fronts: theological, philosophical, and ecological. First, I concur with Webb that Marion’s emphasis on difference risks erasing the possibility of *any* correlation between divine and corporeal gifting. Of course, as I noted above, the other extreme—assuming a crude correlation—is just as problematic. How can Marion be certain of an absolute difference between the two giftings? Perhaps there are shared characteristics? The theologian should at least keep open the possibility—as impossible as it appears to be—of similitude as well as difference. And, as Webb notes, *if there is a possibility of a certain correlation, then this correlation discloses possible insights in terms of praxis.*<sup>113</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Webb notes: “we need to look further for both the full range of the practical application of God’s giving and an account of divine giving that proliferates further giving . . .” Webb, *TGG*, 133.

Marion's insistence on distance opens onto a more vexing philosophical problem broached by Webb. He determines that Marion's primary target is ontology: "Although Marion boldly thinks through the naming of God according to the dynamic of giving, his main concerns remain ontological. He is intent to demonstrate the ways in which giving subverts and frustrates the mechanics of metaphysics."<sup>14</sup> While Marion's intention is unquestionably admirable (freeing phenomena from imposed constraints), his subversion and frustration of metaphysics seems excessive or severe in relation to the question of the gift in the following way: the corporeal gift is not only marked by the otherwise-than-metaphysical (freedom, excess, gratuity) but also by the metaphysical (presence, identification, exchange). Without the latter, the gift would not be received and known as such.

While "the mechanics of metaphysics" undoubtedly undoes the gift's giftness, the gift nevertheless requires it: phenomena that are not received according to some metaphysical measure would not be perceived as "gifts," for the freely given gifts itself to—but also surpasses—identification. Without its metaphysical aspect (presence, identification, exchange), the gift would not be one. While the gift may ultimately elude or overwhelm metaphysics, it nevertheless requires a *certain* grasping—even if held momentarily, tentatively, inadequately.

The question of the need to recognize and maintain the tension between metaphysics and its other is broached below (§ 3.2.2); however, the following remarks may be offered here. In a statement that concludes a fascinating and compelling—but presently somewhat irrelevant—argument identifying a relation between Marion's stance against metaphysics and his hierarchical ecclesialism, Webb contends: "By strenuously displacing the gift from the reach of metaphysics, Marion ends by giving the gift over to an absolute authority that correlates giving with a docile and humbling beholding, not an active return."<sup>15</sup> Now, from the perspective of the gift's linearity, the inability to actively return the gift is a good

<sup>14</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 131-132.

<sup>15</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 133.

thing: the impossibility of active return ensures the maintenance of the gift's giftness. However, there must be some sort of return: the gift's identifiability rests upon it. If the gift is not returned—even in the sense of identification or acknowledgment—then the gift cannot be recognized as such. The gift would be strictly imperceptible. Hence, the gift must not only be received but also returned—as mad as this appears.

Webb in fact accedes that Marion admits to a certain kind of return: "Marion does talk about returning the gift, but only in terms of the discourse of praise."<sup>16</sup> Now, praise is a recognition (and therefore return) of the gift, albeit *not as* inscribed in exchange as other responses (such as the gift-sacrifice)—that is, of course, *if* one is able to think exchange according to *degre*. In other words, some responses seem to be more explicitly mercantile than others. Since praise is a kind of return, and since Webb admits that Marion expresses praise in such terms, then the Webbian assertion that Marion assumes reception-without-return is inaccurate: the overwhelming gift is received but also "returned"—in the form of praise.

Marion's stance against metaphysics opens onto an ecological problem, implied in the large passage that introduces the present section. To recall, one of the statements read: "God's giving obliterates any sign of either a given or a receipt." Obviously, Webb's vocabulary of destruction is exaggerated. However, even though Marion's theology of distance is aimed at a destabilization of the idolization of being, one is left wondering how this distancing could affirm *the ontic*. In other words, Marion's focus on ontology (as an inadequate site for theology) and divinity (as that which is otherwise than being/s) leaves his theology vulnerable in terms of how it relates to *oikology*. While Marion's thinking of divine gifting certainly respects the difference between deity and "thatness," how can "whatness" be affirmed in the face of this difference? In other words, does Marion's theology yield any ecological insights? How can the matrix of beings be acknowledged and

<sup>16</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 184, n. 18; Webb refers to *GIWB*, 107.

embraced in the face of this daunting distance? In sum, how could Marion's theology of distance be related to a theology of what-is?

The risk of ignoring materiality in the effort to think divinity (by transgressing a thinking of being) manifests itself in Webb's own text. He states: "Marion helps us understand how the gifting God differs from the God of the philosophers—how, that is, the question of the gift needs to be disentangled from the question of what is . . ." <sup>117</sup> Marion powerfully demonstrates how the divine would, by definition, exceed ontological circumscription. However, should the question of the gift be *disentangled* from the question of what-is? If answered in the affirmative, this disentanglement would render the present *eco/theo/logical* aporetics careless and futile. While Marion certainly helps us to understand the difference between *theology* and *ontotheology*, the question of receiving and responding to creation *re-entangles* the question of the gift and what-is, for what is being posed in the present study is the possibility of creation's giftness.

But does this possibility entail abandoning Marion's powerful critique of metaphysics? Certainly not: a double movement is required. The task of Marionitic disentanglement needs to be complemented by a task of *niko/theo/logical* entanglement. As much as one should emphasize divinity's distance from being/s, one must nevertheless and simultaneously move in the opposite—or at least alternative—direction: if the material web of creation is gift-ed by divinity in some sense, then there is a relation between divine giver and corporeal recipient that interrupts any non/relation characterized by radical distance and difference. In other words, the traditional notion that creation is a gift freely given by God interrupts the absolute distance emphasized by Marion. The creation-gift is precisely the question that interminably and immemorally entangles the relation between our selves and our giver (if there is any).

<sup>117</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 133; also refer to Webb, *TGG*, 76.

### Paralyzed By The Aporia

The preceding retracing of the word "gift" and its reflections in Christian texts spells out a number of aspects to the question of the gift as a problem. First, the word "gift" is, from a biblical perspective, a semantically saturated term. It is registered in acts as antithetical as bribery and grace (§ 2.1.1). Second, these divergent meanings of the gift carry over into archival theology. On those rare moments when theologians refer to, or, even more rarely, ponder the gift itself, they cite either of its two competing aspects, and sometimes even simultaneously acknowledge both. However, extant archival theology does not appear to explicitly dwell on the gift in all its aporeticity (§ 2.1.2).

Twentieth century theology produces sustained reflections on the gift. Schmitz's book on the creation-gift, published before Derrida's *Given Time*, explicitly and admirably grapples with the gift's aporeticity. Schmitz thinks the gift in its sheer gratuity and in its lived experience. He employs a lexicon of moderation to come to terms with the gift, but his thinking oscillates between pronouncing and downplaying its two aspects (§ 2.2.1). With Webb's post-Derridean meditation on the gift, his insightful analysis and mediation of squandering helps illuminate the aporia. However, Webb's analysis of gratitude is somewhat problematic (§ 2.2.2), as is his theology of gifting, which seems to inadvertently accentuate the gift's aporeticity (§ 2.2.3). Marion's thought on the gift during his reflection on the prodigal, in which the gift's circularity is emphasized, also raises questions (§ 2.2.4). Webb's critique of Marion's emphasis on excess likewise demonstrates ways in which the gift-aporia entangles thought (§ 2.2.5). In the course of these admirable meditations on the gift, comes inevitable paralysis and entanglement: and this is to be expected—and even appreciated—when one thinks and dwells in the gift-aporia.

### 3. ON THE WAY TO OSCILLATION

#### The Given, The Gift, And Oscillation

In the last section of the previous chapter, I engaged with the ways in which twentieth century theologians (Schmitz, Webb, and Marion) have figured the gift (§ 2.2). I noted in my introductory remarks on Marion's work that he also offers a philosophical account of the gift (§ 2.2.4). This account arises out of his effort to develop a phenomenology of givenness. With the publication of Marion's most important philosophical works *Reduction and Givenness* and *Being Given*, the correlated questions of the given and the gift are worked out; Marion explains: "with *Reduction and Givenness*, the question of the gift turned out to be profoundly modified for me by the discovery of the issue of givenness, *Gegebenheit*, in phenomenology . . ." As the present chapter illustrates, Marion's modification turns out to be profound in its radical refiguration of the gift, for he describes a gift that is released from its element of exchange. However, the modification is not unproblematic, particularly with its re-inscription of the role of indebtedness in gifting (§ 3.1.1-3).

In the wake of the problems that seem to mark even Marion's brilliant post-metaphysical thinking of gifting, I thereby turn to an examination of the possibility of *oscillation* as a possible way of thinking and receiving the gift-aporia (§ 3.2). I argue that, since we cannot "escape" the gift's aporeticity, we should engage the gift in all its aporeticity: this would mean that we do not bias one or the other elements

<sup>1</sup> Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 56. Refer to *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998). (Originally published as *Réduction et donation: Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger, et la phénoménologie*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989); and, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) [hereafter Marion, *BG*]. (Originally published as *Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.) Also refer to the third of this triptych, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). Since Marion treats the question of the gift in Book II of *Being Given*, I focus on that text; Book II is based on the essay "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift," trans. John Conley and Danielle Poe, *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 122-143 [hereafter Marion, *JPCG*].

of the gift, but rather oscillate between the two aspects. Our reception of the gift would respect and reflect the gift's excess and exchange.

I introduce the first section of this chapter by briefly describing Schmitz's views on the relation between the gift and the given. I then discuss Marion's work according to the three elements of gifting: the recipient (§ 3.1.1), the gift-giver, and the gift itself (§ 3.1.2). The last subsection is a broader examination of Marion's negotiation of the gift's tension, where I focus on his bias against exchange, his bias for excess, and the relation between the gift and knowledge (§ 3.1.3).

#### 3.1 THINKING GIFTING ACCORDING TO GIVENNESS

From the very beginning of this study, I acknowledged that this aporeticity takes a "leap of faith" by perceiving the self-evident given of creation as a gift. But what is the nature of the relation between the given and the gift? Archival theology rarely explicitly thinks this relation. An exception is found with Augustine; he recognizes a semantic difference between the gift and the given: "there is a difference in meaning between a gift and a thing that has been given. For a gift may exist even before it is given; but it cannot be called a thing that has been given unless it has been given."<sup>2</sup> I take up the question of the semantic difference in due course, but this much may be stated regarding Augustine's remark: according to a Derridean aporeticity, a gift would also have to be given (received, exchanged), in order for it to be recognized as a gift. Hence, Augustine's differentiation is problematic insofar as it does not recognize the gift's element of identification.

Centuries later, Schmitz offers an account of the relation between the given and the gift in *The Gift: Creation*. He examines the predominant way in which "the given" is regarded nowadays and how it obscures the significance of perceiving creation as a gift. Schmitz claims: "The chief obstacle to a better appreciation of the category of the gift is a widespread current attitude towards the world; it is the

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Bk. V, ch. 15/16, in *PNF*, on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/npnf103/hum/iv.i.vii.xv.htm>> 1 August 2003.

attitude that takes the world as a *given fact*.<sup>3</sup> He examines the phrase “given fact” conjointly, and argues that its meaning is not obvious: “They [“given” and “fact”] combine to form the first name we give to what we encounter. Moreover, in scientific and learned discourse and in everyday speech as well, this initial name proves ultimately decisive and presides over most subsequent understanding of the world, so that our thought seldom breaks free from this first determination of the things that are.”<sup>4</sup>

Schmitz’s point is compelling, and the fact that I began the study by figuring creation as a “self-evident observation”—which amounts to the same thing as a “given fact” or a “first determination”—testifies to the status of “the given.” However—and without wanting to slide into a hierarchical dualism (the primacy of the given over the gift), the present work certainly moves beyond—or, more accurately, *otherwise than*—the determination of givenness. It does not, however, “break free”: such phrases belong to the language and logic of bondage (which belongs to hierarchical dualism): this aporetic takes a willing leap, but it is neither an escape from, nor a reversal of, the “first determination” of givenness. There is no need for choosing or displacement here: thinking traverses many paths.

Now, Schmitz also detects a difference between saying that some thing is “there” and saying it is “given”: something seems to be added with the latter term.<sup>5</sup> He immediately introduces another coupling: the given (French: *donnée*; Latin: *datum*) and the gift (*don*, *donum*, respectively), to signal a relation between givenness and giftness. Schmitz wants to revive this relation, after first retracing the way in which this pair have become increasingly estranged. He notes how “the given” is utilized by empiricist philosophy, the positive sciences, and technology; the “given” indicates agreement (e.g., “given that . . .”). The given is understood as “a starting-

<sup>3</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 35; until stated otherwise, the subsequent citations are drawn from this page.

<sup>5</sup> In a note, Schmitz refers to *OED* definitions of “given,” “givenness,” “grant,” “datum,” “fact,” and “factum.” Schmitz, *TGC*, 136, n. 54. Schmitz defines givenness as “the characterization of the evidence as given.” *TGC*, 38.

point for scientific discourse” and “accepted for the sake of the use that can be made of it.”

Schmitz explains the way in which “the given” is figured instrumentally: “The cast of mind is towards future developments and results.” He recognizes that scientific discourse produces a “paradoxical usage” of “given”: it excludes reference to a giver and denotes self-completion: “An epistemology that limits itself to *data* does not permit the knower to go ‘behind’ or ‘beneath’ *the given* in search of an ontological cause . . .”<sup>6</sup> Schmitz adds: “The givenness of the given remains inviolate in such discourse, and admits of no giver within its semantic field. . . . [T]he term [given] enjoys a certain absolution from the conditions of explanation and interference just because it lies prior to them as their starting-point . . .”<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, this is not simply an outright criticism of the way “given” is, today, figured by the predominant discourses of our time, for Schmitz is willing to register the positive results of the way in which these discourses construe the given.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, he explains how there is a risk that this determination may block the passage from the given to the gift (or vice versa): “it needs to be said that such a domain of discourse [the natural sciences, empiricist philosophy, technology, etc.] is not the only domain; and that such a mode of discourse closes out the more primitive semantic atmosphere that arises before us as we reflect upon the gift rather than upon the given.”<sup>9</sup> Schmitz’s concern is certainly justified here: the possibility that there has been a “closing out” with the rise of modern science, and its scientific and materialistic excesses, would be evidenced by the incredulity that may mark the reception of the present reflection: can every-thing *really* be a gift?

<sup>6</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Schmitz recognizes the advantages of understanding the given as the starting-point: “It is important to acknowledge the remarkable results achieved in this way in the natural sciences, and also in some aspects of the human and social sciences.” *TGC*, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 41. At this point Schmitz makes the following remark, which is not directly relevant in terms of an aporetic of gifting, but certainly has become pertinent in the wake of Marion’s phenomenology of givenness: “according to Hegel, nothing is simply given; everything is the result of a *self-giving* carried through from first to last by Absolute Spirit (*Geist*). In this sense, everything is *self-given*.”

According to the issues raised by Schmitz's discourse on this relation, particularly the positing of the given as a "first determination," and the question of an "ontological cause," how does Marion figure this relation? Unlike Schmitz, who writes his book as a theologian, Marion, writes *Being Given* as a phenomenologist: the latter, who is thereby released from certain credal commitments, revels in the notion of givenness as a "first determination." He declares: "What *shows itself* first *gives itself*—this is my one and only theme," and, "To show implies letting appearances appear in such a way that they accomplish their own apparition, so as to be received exactly as they give themselves."<sup>10</sup> Straightaway, one recognizes that Marion will, *contra* Schmitz, suspend the question of an "ontological cause" "behind" or "beneath" the given. However, the issue of whether Marion privileges the given over the gift is a more ambiguous question, and it is examined in due course (§ 3.2.2).

So how does *Being Given* describe the givenness of given things? Marion instructs that "[g]ivenness can only appear indirectly, in the fold of the given . . ."<sup>11</sup> On the face of it, his thesis seems self-evident: why shouldn't phenomena be described according to the manner in which they show themselves in their self-giving? But his thinking is also radical: that which appears has hitherto been phenomenologically figured according to the horizons of objectness (as an object) and beingness (as a being in its being).<sup>12</sup>

Marion's analysis of a painting according to a thinking of givenness clarifies his project. He explains that a painting is more than the sum of its parts; nor can the givenness of the work be disclosed in terms of its various functions and values.<sup>13</sup> Another way of approaching a painting is that its being discloses

<sup>10</sup> Marion, *BG*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Marion, *BG*, 39. The relation between givenness and the given is similar to the relation between being and beingness or object and objectness: the former can only be disclosed in the latter.

<sup>12</sup> Marion seeks to move beyond the phenomenologies of Edmund Husserl and Heidegger, who respectively define phenomena in terms of objectness and beingness.

<sup>13</sup> Horner explains: "The painting implies a painter or several painters, as well as spectators, an intention to paint, materials used, and so forth." Horner, *RGG*, 119.

something like beauty or truth. But Marion argues that even this approach is metaphysical: the work of art is still thought to have an end.<sup>14</sup>

So what does a painting reveal, according to Marion? He can only describe the givenness disclosed in a visible given in non-visible terms: the painting expresses its "melody" or "effect."<sup>15</sup> Marion figures this indescribable melody with some finesse: "To the ontic visibility of the painting is added as a super-visibility, ontically indescribable—its upsurge," or, "a coming-up, an arising . . ."<sup>16</sup> He explains: "To different degrees but always, the painting (like every phenomenon) does not show any object nor is it presented as a being; rather it accomplishes an act—it comes forward into visibility."<sup>17</sup> Marion cites Cézanne: "Only the objects that we make a habit of dealing with every day have a totally superficial effect on a man [sic] of middling sensibility. Those by contrast that we see for the first time have, unfailingly, a certain effect on us."<sup>18</sup> (Incidentally, Cézanne's comment, together with Marion's phenomenological endorsement and elaboration, is poignant: the present work encourages its audience to perceive phenomena persistently as if for the first time.)

Marion's example of a painting described according to the horizon of givenness indicates the way in which Marion seeks to understand phenomena: he wants to release the phenomenon (be it a painting or anything else) from the constraints of metaphysical thinking. Marion states: "the given phenomenon always shows itself too broadly for the scope of our grasp," and phenomena therefore "slip from the sway of cause and the status of effect."<sup>19</sup> He also criticizes, in a way which is implicitly or potentially *oikological*, the hitherto prevailing climate in which

<sup>14</sup> Marion *BG*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Marion, *BG*, 48, 49f.

<sup>16</sup> Marion, *BG*, 47, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Marion, *BG*, 49. Exemplary phenomena without objectness include time, life, and language. Phenomena without beingness include death, sense and silence.

<sup>18</sup> Marion, *BG*, 50. The statement appears in Emile Bernard and others, *Conversations avec Cézanne*, ed. P. M. Dorian (Paris: Collection Macula, 1978), 107.

<sup>19</sup> Marion, *BG*, 158, 162.

metaphysics has privileged “logical and mathematical phenomena” over “daily” phenomena—“the beings of nature, the living in general, the historical event, the face of the Other . . .”<sup>20</sup>

So how does Marion describe *gifting* according to the nonmetaphysical thinking of givenness? Marion prefaces his phenomenological description of the gift with the following statement (which is figured as a question): “Why not suppose that the gift . . . can, once purified of its empirical blossoming, provide at least the outline of a noncausal, nonefficient, and finally nonmetaphysical model of givenness?”<sup>21</sup> Hence, Marion seeks to purify the gift of causality, thereby rendering it the freedom to show itself as it gives itself.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Marion argues against or beyond the everyday, metaphysical understanding of the gift (something freely given by a giver to a receiver) in which the gift, figured according to the natural attitude, is governed by causality and the principle of sufficient reason.<sup>23</sup>

Marion allows the gift to show itself without metaphysical overlay by bracketing or “reducing” the gift from an economic horizon to a horizon of givenness.<sup>24</sup> What is meant by “reduction” in the phenomenological sense? Setting aside the question of a thing’s existence, the reduction focuses on the phenomenon’s appearance to consciousness. The reduction to givenness entails the removal of economic exchange from the gift, for, as Marion contends—and spurred on by Derrida’s reflection—exchange economy is the source of the gift’s annulment.<sup>25</sup> This means that, by bracketing at least one of the elements of gifting

<sup>20</sup> Marion, *BG*, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Marion, *BG*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Marion states: “the gift only becomes itself by breaking away from the economy . . .” Marion, *SPCG*, 131.

<sup>23</sup> Marion explains: “the giver gives the gift in the role of efficient cause, mobilizing a formal and a material cause (in order to define, reify the gift), and pursuing a final cause (the good of the givee and/or the glory of the giver). These four causes enable givenness to satisfy the principle of sufficient reason.” Marion, *BG*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Marion, *BG*, 84; *SPCG*, 131.

<sup>25</sup> Marion, *BG*, 74f.

(giver, recipient, and gift), one is able to disable the metaphysical chain giver-gift-recipient. I now turn to a description and discussion of each of these reductions.

### 3.1.1 Marion’s Indebted Givee

Marion begins by bracketing the recipient (or “givee”). The inclusion of the givee in the phenomenon of gift/ing would disqualify it on two counts. First, the givee may become the cause of the cause, thereby refiguring the gift as an effect. Marion argues that the gift may arise in the context of supplication or even threat on behalf of the givee, thereby determining the givee as the gift’s sufficient cause, or that the givee is denoted as the final cause, since they deserve the gift, for example, as a result of their misery or deeds.<sup>26</sup> Second, if the givee remains after the event of the gift, then there is the inevitability that they will be involved in the cycle of reciprocity. Echoing Derrida, Marion explains that the sheer recognition of the gift by the givee re-inscribes it in an exchange economy.

Hence, in order for the gift to phenomenize, it takes place according to what Marion calls “a law of *nonreturn*”: “The gift, to be given, must be lost and remain lost without return. . . . Beyond gratuity, it is a question of the pure and simple loss involved in giving with abandon.”<sup>27</sup> This rule ensures that gift/ing evades causality and exchange. This rule is enacted: “one must always give at least *as if* the givee never had to repay . . .”<sup>28</sup> Marion provides the example of volunteer aid: the giver does not know the givee, and the givee cannot repay the giver.

And so, the givee responds to the gift with a response that borders on non-response: “There is nothing to say or do. I [the givee] benefit from the gift and cannot repay it. It therefore remains for me to accept it without any more thank-you’s.”<sup>29</sup> Marion *almost* recommends sheer acceptance—but not quite: this not-

<sup>26</sup> Marion, *BG*, 86.

<sup>27</sup> Marion, *BG*, 86.

<sup>28</sup> Marion, *BG*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Marion, *BG*, 96.

quiteness is indicated by the phrase “any more.” It implies the trace of gratitude, for Marion does not recommend *no* thank-you’s but rather *no more* thank you’s. It seems he is not willing to abandon thanking. Like the theologians that precede him, the gift, for Marion, continues to oblige thanking. When the givee is bracketed, the gift is unable to return to the giver. *And yet*, the givee remains indebted, even though this indebtedness is radicalized:

I cannot repay, for there is no longer anyone whom I could repay. . . . [S]ince he [the givee; sic] can no longer repay anything to anybody, the givee must himself acknowledge himself as definitively in debt, therefore as intrinsically givee. . . . The debt will never be repaid, not for a lack of good will or a shortage of means, but from a lack of a creditor . . . . [T]he debt itself precedes all consciousness of it and defines its self. The self as such, the self of consciousness, receives *itself* at the outset as a gift (given) without giver (giving). The debt gives rise to the self such as it discovers itself already there. . . . The consciousness of owing (oneself) to the missing giver makes the self, the debt, and the consciousness of all these coincide. . . . The debt therefore designates not so much an act or a situation of the self as its state and its definition—possibly its way to be.<sup>30</sup>

This thinking of the gift admirably destabilizes the notion of the autocratic, self-made subject: “This recognition of debt, contrary to appearances is no small matter. At issue is what phenomenologically *and morally* is the hardest ordeal: to succeed in making an exception to the principle, ‘I don’t owe anything to anybody.’”<sup>31</sup>

However, the following questions nevertheless present themselves: has Marion divested the self of *any* degree of solvency or independence? Does this immemorial indebtedness effectively release the self from the circle of causality and

<sup>30</sup> Marion, *BG*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Marion, *BG*, 100-101. He repeatedly recalls and destabilizes this catch-cry of hyper-individualism; refer to, e.g., *BG*, 91, 101, 108, 115. Homer’s appraisal of Marion’s work on the question of the subject is affirmative: “In my judgment, Marion’s analysis of subjectivity is excellent.” *RGG*, 83, n. 93; refer to *RGG*, esp. 149-152.

debt, or does Marion’s refiguring of the giver and recipient smuggles gratitude back into the scene of the gift by another route? More specifically, does Marion imply a divine gift-giver? This last question is pursued in the next subsection; of immediate pertinence is the fact that Marion re-introduces debt into the question of the gift. How may one evaluate Marion’s insistence on indebtedness?

Caputo raises his concern about the return of indebtedness in Marion’s phenomenology in his closing remarks at the end of the 1997 exchange between Marion and Derrida at a conference entitled “Religion and Postmodernism” at Villanova University.<sup>32</sup> Caputo’s objection is made all the more relevant in the present context because the creation-gift is evoked:

I think that in *Etant donné* [*Being Given*] Marion removes the gift from the sphere of causality but my question is whether it is removed from debt. Do we not come into a universal indebtedness to God the giver, even though the gift has been released from a causal economy?. . . . I worry whether we do not end up in debt in Marion. . . . Should anyone end up in debt from a gift? Should we be in debt to God for the gift of creation? If creation is a gift, then it is not a debt but something we affirm and celebrate.<sup>33</sup>

As I am still considering the gift-aporia *per se* at this stage, I defer until the next chapter the more “specific” question (and possibility) of the divinely co/gift-ed creation-gift and the diverging reactions of obligation and celebration. What is of immediate concern is the question of the legitimacy of indebtedness as an appropriate response to the gift. Now, Caputo’s objection arises not only from the encounter itself (to which I return in due course), but also out of an abiding concern and passion for the gift, particularly in terms of Caputo’s insistence on the gift’s gratuity, and his concomitant resistance towards its reduction to an indebting exchange. A brief retracing of certain aspects of this abiding concern is sketched

<sup>32</sup> The conference provided the impetus and most of the material for the volume produced by Caputo and Scanlon, *GGP*.

<sup>33</sup> Caputo in Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 77; emphases added.

here for a number of interrelated reasons: it provides the textual backdrop to Caputo's Villanovian objection; it illuminates the Derridean discourse on the gift and circularity; and, third, it provides a springboard to further discussions on the recurring question of debt and return (both in the present subsection, and in subsequent subsections).

First of all, Caputo's passion for the gift's gratuity is spurred by a lineage of thinkers who transgress the thought of the circle (discourse, system, ethics), including Søren Kierkegaard and Derrida. Kierkegaard, exemplary thinker of the singular, re-reads the amazing, disturbing story of the near-sacrifice of Abraham's son (Gen 22), and reminds us that Abraham's response to God transgresses the ethical command to refrain from murder.<sup>34</sup> As texts that appear almost simultaneously, Derrida's 1992 publication, *Donner la mort* (published in 1995 as *The Gift of Death*), Caputo's *Against Ethics* (1993) and *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997) all deal with the Abrahamic saga on Mount Moriah, substantially informed by Kierkegaard's re-reading.<sup>35</sup> But what does that remarkable biblical event have to do with the gift?

To begin with, these Derridean and Caputocean texts turn on the question of "responsibility." Taking their cues from Kierkegaard, Derrida and Caputo stress the way in which the call of the Other (be it God or any other other) makes a demand which transgresses the rule or *nomos* of the ethical community.<sup>36</sup> The event on Mount Mariah is exemplary in this regard: Abraham is forced to choose between the divine command and the proscription of murder. Caputo explains why this particular event exemplifies a gifting beyond exchange (discourse, regulation,

<sup>34</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Works*, vol. 6, "Fear and Trembling" and "Repetition," trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>35</sup> Refer to *PTJD*, 357, n. 20. *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) [hereafter Caputo, *AE*]. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) [hereafter Derrida, *GD*]. (Originally published as "Donner la mort," in *L'éthique du don, Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté and Michael Wetzal [Paris: Transition, 1992].)

<sup>36</sup> The pivotal term Caputo utilizes in his text is "obligation." Since this term may be confused with "duty," I refrain from using it in the following exposition. Like Derrida, Caputo also utilizes the term "responsibility" in an affirmative sense; refer to *AE*, e.g., 66-68.

justification): Abraham silently and secretly transgresses the ethical order in his obligation or response to the Other. Abraham is willing to give up what he loves. According to the text, Abraham's gift approaches a pure gift insofar as nothing is to be returned; Abraham does not expect a return. In this decisive moment of responding to God, Caputo proclaims that "Abraham tore reason and the circle of time to shreds."<sup>37</sup> Of course, the ever-thoughtful Caputo acknowledges the possibility of some kind of coercive commerce at work in Abraham's decision (fear, machismo, etc.).<sup>38</sup> Bracketing this disruptive possibility, the near-sacrifice on Mount Moriah thereby approximates the exemplary gift in its rupture from the circle of reason-giving ethics.

And so, a link is identified between the gift and responsibility. Caputo defines responsibility in its relation to the religious: "The religious is the responsibility of the subject to the wholly other [*tout autre*], which is precisely what Levinas calls the 'ethical.' Derrida's difference with Levinas, his Kierkegaardianism, lies in his willingness to sacrifice 'ethics,' both the word and the concept, which for Derrida and Kierkegaard (and Heidegger)—means the *calculability of obligation* . . ."<sup>39</sup> The scope of responsibility is expanded beyond the domain of the religious: As Caputo explains: "[T]here is no assured and rigorous concept of responsibility, no rigorous formula, to regulate our lives in ethics, politics, or international diplomacy."<sup>40</sup> We respond responsibly to each Other in its singularity without recourse to stringent regulations.

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* discloses a second instance of gifting: it alludes to Matthew 6 (giving alms in secret) at the end of that book, which

<sup>37</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Caputo explains: "After all, even Abraham's sacrifice—is this not what deconstruction shows, even though Derrida, out of filial respect, does not bring it up?—is not absolutely safe, absolutely removed, absolutely safeguarded from hidden, subterranean, unconscious, unwanted, unwilled motivations that would turn it into the reverse of what it means to be (*vouloir*)? Maybe Abraham is just frightened. . . . Maybe Abraham is just being very stubborn, very macho and patriarchal!" *PTJD*, 220. The subterranean makes the *terra firma* tremble.

<sup>39</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 206.

<sup>40</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 211.

effectively “slips Genesis 22 inside Matthew 6 . . .”<sup>41</sup> In the final chapter of *The Gift of Death*, Derrida (following Nietzsche) provides an incisive critique of Matthean gifting.<sup>42</sup> While Matthew 6 resembles Abrahamic gifting insofar as Matthew instructs that almsgiving is to be enacted secretly (Mt 6.1-2a), he immediately throws calculation into the equation: hypocritical almsgivers “have received their award” (Mt 6.2b), while secretive givers will be rewarded by the all-seeing God (6.4b, 6.6b, 16.18b, etc.)—even though their hands would know not what the other one is doing (Mt 6.3-4a), and even though the other cheek would be offered instead of payback (5.39f). The gift of Matthean faith is both commercial (calculating, accumulative) and excessive (secret, forgiving).

Caputo takes up Derrida’s Nietzschean criticism of calculative religiosity. His critique also extends to Paul. Caputo questions the Pauline notion of humanity’s infinite debt to God (a debt payable only by Jesus), a notion that, according to Caputo, falls “under the cover of the beautiful name of ‘gift’ (*gratia*).”<sup>43</sup> Caputo powerfully criticizes this Pauline notion of debt: “Growing in faith is a capital growth fund, an infinite extension of a (very) long-term credit line which entitles the believer to draw upon the credits that are accumulated for him [sic] by the infinite contribution to the fund made by Christ’s sacrificial death.”<sup>44</sup>

To be sure, Caputo’s critique of a mercantile religiosity is not simply critical: his criticism, which is certainly warranted, clears the way for a theology of forgiveness over investment and indebtedness: this theology, which is “slightly de-Paulinized and more Jewish,” moves away from an economy of sin and

<sup>41</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 212-213.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *GD*, ch. 4, esp. 94f.

<sup>43</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 216.

<sup>44</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 217. In § 2.1.1, I referred to the paradoxical nature of the Pauline corpus on gifting: on the one hand, Paul certainly emphasizes the circular character of the gift; on the other, he acknowledges that the gift is “indescribable.” Paul simply repeats (or perhaps inaugurates?) the paradox of the gift as we know it: conditional and unconditional, circular and unreturnable, describable and indescribable.

redemption, and towards a path of giving, “for-giving,” and “for-getting.”<sup>45</sup> Caputo prays: “Forgive us as indeed we forgive others. . . . Dismiss our debts as we dismiss our debtors.”<sup>46</sup> Whereas Marion stresses the authoritativeness of the father figure in the story of the prodigal, a “slightly de-paulinized” and very Christic theology emphasizes the immediate embrace and celebration of the prodigal’s return. Dutiful ethics burdens the prodigal subject—it “gives the subject a beating, while forgiving gives it a break.”<sup>47</sup>

This edifying Caputocean discourse, itself inspired by the gift and gifted thinkers, is certainly convincing. The call for a forgiving gifting certainly displaces calculative and indebted gifting. But would this call completely silence indebtedness—and should it? Should duty and debt lose their claim as legitimate responses to the gift? Suspending, for a little while, the possibility that Caputo’s Derridean critique displaces or dissolves indebtedness (§ 3.2.2-3), this much may be stated here: Caputo’s deconstructive theology of the gift certainly emphasizes the gift’s excess over its return. From the perspective of a forgiving, less calculating theology, it is little wonder, then, that the concerned, impassioned Caputo presses Marion—who does not seem troubled by being indebted—with that burning question: “Should we be in debt to God for creation?”

Now, having asked that question, Caputo takes up the issue of indebtedness in his thought-provoking commentary on the Villanova exchange, “Apostles of the Impossible,” specifically in the section titled “Economy and Debt,” and that particular section is followed closely here, for it not only recalls some of the ideas raised above, but also compares Derrida’s and Marion’s thoughts on the question of debt.<sup>48</sup> In “Apostles of the Impossible,” Caputo explains that “Marion and

<sup>45</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 222f. The possibility of forgiveness is also pursued in *AE*, esp. 110f. Also refer to Caputo’s thinking of forgiving in a broader theological context in “Reason, History and a Little Madness: Towards an Ethics of the Kingdom,” in Kearney and Dooley, *QE*, 84-104, esp. 96-98.

<sup>46</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 226-227.

<sup>47</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 226.

<sup>48</sup> “Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion,” in *GGP*, 185-222 [hereafter Caputo, *AI*].

Derrida have very different conceptions of just what constitutes an 'economy' of the gift . . ."<sup>49</sup> The former is "willing to settle for a *higher* economy, just so long as this economy is not implicated in causality, in causal agents and effects." *And yet*: "Marion does not dispute the contention that from the very moment that any of the three elements of the gift [giver, givee, gift] appear the *movement of debt* is set in motion." We remain indebted: Marion recalls an "indebting givenness (*la donation endettant*)."<sup>50</sup> This movement "does not present a problem to Marion because debt enters into the very *definition of the gift* for him—'donability,' he says, means the duty (*devoir*) to give—while for Derrida debt is poison to the gift, *Vergiftung*, and the very *definition of economy*, which annuls the gift."

This movement of donability does not present a problem in the context of Marion's nonmetaphysical figuring of gifting; Caputo argues: "For Marion to escape economy it is enough to give a non-objectivistic phenomenological description of the gift outside the *chain of the four causes* (efficient, formal, material, and final), while for Derrida the defining feature of an economy of exchange is the link or *chain between credit and debt*, even if the chain (*catena, cadean*) is composed of invisible-moral links, not causal or objectivistic ones."<sup>51</sup>

Caputo explains that the projects of the two thinkers are different: Marion attempts to avoid the metaphysical pitfalls of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology. Derrida attends to the question of Christianity's disparate movements of debt and excess: on the one hand, Christian giving and forgiving is propelled by an uncalculating love. *And yet*, Christianity is still restrained by a calculative logic which extends all the way to heaven. In Caputo's words: "Derrida has [Nietzsche's] *Genealogy of Morals* in mind. Derrida is worried about the

<sup>49</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 212; until stated otherwise, the subsequent citations are drawn from this page.

<sup>50</sup> The phrase "indebting givenness" appears in Marion, *SPCG*, 142. (Caputo references Marion's "Esquisse d'un concept phénoménologique du don," in *Filosofia della rivelazione* 72 [1994]: 75-94, of which the English translation is Marion, *SPCG*.)

<sup>51</sup> The accompanying note highlights Marion's restricted definition of "economy": "in the debate over the gift, 'economy' is narrowed down to mean only a causal-objectivistic relation." Caputo, *AI*, 222-23, n. 34.

contamination of *credere*, faith in the gift, by credit, which makes the gift a medium of exchange and so destroys its credibility as a gift, even and especially in celestial matters, which is the point of the analysis in the last chapter of *The Gift of Death*.<sup>52</sup>

Caputo sums up the difference between the two: "Marion is worrying about causality, Derrida about credit." Caputo declares: "what most deeply divides Marion and Derrida, and the reason why any appearance at all of the gift, however partial, catches it up in economy for Derrida while not posing any problem of economy to Marion, is the appearance of debt." For this reason, Caputo regrets the fact that the question of debt was not raised at the exchange; he laments: "the one point that I would like to have heard next addressed is just this question of debt. For that, in my view, is central to the difference between Marion and Derrida."

Now, Caputo directs the question of debt into the domain of subjectivity, even though he agrees with Marion and Derrida that "the true gift must come after [or before] the subject." Caputo recalls Derrida's point about the incompatibility between debt (in the form of duty and obligation) and the gift. In other words, a gift should be given freely—by definition. And so, one is forced to ask: how can a tithe, for example, be a gift? Gifting, as we know it, *exceeds* circularity.<sup>53</sup> Qualifying his remarks with the disclaimer "From Derrida's point of view," Caputo questions why the element of debt is factored into Marion's thinking of gifting. After all, duty is to practical reason what causality is to speculative reason.

So how would Marion address Caputo's weighty concerns? Caputo surmises: "Marion would respond that we are indebted not to another donor but to *donation* itself, to the horizon of givenness by whose momentum giver and donee are carried along . . ."<sup>54</sup> Speaking for Derrida, Caputo responds that indebtedness still undoes the gift. What's more, this "creditor" ("donation itself") burdens us with an "insoluble debt . . ." And so, Caputo urges: "If we have been loved and given gifts,

<sup>52</sup> Refer to Nietzsche, *OGM*, § 19-21. What is also notable in this statement is Caputo's utilization of the term "contamination," to which I return below (§ 3.2.2-3).

<sup>53</sup> Caputo argues: "For Derrida, a duty and obligation are inconsistent with the gift. If it is a gift, I am not obliged to do it; if it is an obligation, I am not making a gift. . . ." Caputo, *AI*, 213.

<sup>54</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 214; until stated otherwise, the subsequent citations are drawn from this page.

we ought not to be plunged into a horizon of infinite insolvent debt." Otherwise, one reprises what is, for Nietzsche, Christianity's "stroke of genius": the unpayable debt incurred by humanity for the divine crucifixion.<sup>55</sup> The powerful passage, which completes the section on "Economy and Debt," bears repeating in its totality:

For the Derrida of *The Gift of Death*, Marion plays into the hands of Nietzsche's barb about Christianity's *Geniestreich*, its stroke of genius. *Cur deus homo?* [Why did God become human?] Because God must be paid what God is owed, and God wants blood, infinitely precious blood, to pay off an infinite, incalculable debt, to spill sacred sacrificial blood to offset the absolute insolvency of the sinner. It seems as if God saw everything He [sic] made and said that it was guilty and in insolvent debt, which calls for a blood economy. Who could believe that, Derrida asks with Nietzsche? [*The Gift of Death*, 114-115] For a Derridean theology, it would seem that the God of gifts, the gift of God, and the gift of God in Jesus are to be thought not in terms of insolvent debt but in terms of giving without debt and in forgiving what debts accumulate. . . . Debts are for forgiving, not accumulating. According to the New Testament, the only calculation forgiving allows is that one should forgive seven times a day, and seventy times seven [Mt 18.22], that is to say, innumerable, countless, incontestably. That would seem to be, from Derrida's point of view, the real *Geniestreich* of Jesus.<sup>56</sup>

From a Derridean perspective, an uncalculating gifting would be the "real *Geniestreich* of Jesus." As radical and inspirational as such genius would be, does it remain faithful to the gift-aporia? Should indebtedness be *totally* disconnected from gifting? On the contrary, the Matthean and Pauline faiths of the New/Second Testament are paradoxically marked by *both* excess and calculation.

At this stage, the following thoughts may be offered. First of all, it remains unclear whether Marion would *oppose* the radical Christic genius of uncalculated gifting, even though he himself seems unwilling to push for *sheer* receptivity, but

<sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, *OGM*, § 21, 92.

<sup>56</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 214-215.

rather calls for no more thank-you's. This kind of almost-sheer receptivity is substantiated in *Being Given*: Marion objects to the exchangeism in a revered thinker like Anselm (1033-1109), and therefore seems to recall the *Geniestreich* that Caputo (and Derrida) admire:

It must be remarked that when a theologian of Anselm's caliber dares to think the Incarnation in terms of satisfaction—the dignified exchange between the fault for sin and its retribution in the Redemption (*Cur Deus homo*, I: 12)—he finds himself bearing the brunt of objections that are all the stronger as they remain strictly theological. The model of the gift as transcendent exchange cannot stand, especially not in revealed theology.<sup>57</sup>

Marion stresses that the gift has nothing to do with exchange economy. His phenomenology of the gift is an attempt to distance the gift from circularity. However, his phenomenology still seems to remain entangled in the gift-aporia: on the one hand, he attempts to transgress exchange economy; on the other hand, he re-introduces indebtedness. *However*, the evocation of indebtedness in the course of the gift's description or theorization, whether phenomenological or otherwise, should not be necessarily considered somehow faulty or erroneous. Why? The notion of debt should not be severed from the question of the gift, for its inclusion in a discourse about *gifting*—while paradoxical or contradictory—reflects, maintains, and pays attention to the gift's proper tension.

Indeed, the recourse to debt, and our concomitant paralysis, appears to be a sign that the gift's theorization is headed in the right direction: the gift is an aporia (*aporos*, "without passage") because of the indebtedness that leads to contradictoriness. The gift is aporetic precisely because we cannot "avoid" its element of return. Without being too pre-emptive, I propose that we "embrace" this element—in a certain way, oscillationally.

<sup>57</sup> Marion, *BG*, 349, n. 54.

## 3.1.2 Not Knowing Who Gives What

Marion's next phenomenological move is the suspension of the gift-giver. He asks: "Take a gift, any gift, consider it in such a way that its giver remains absent—either unknown in reality or actually undecidable—in short, let us imagine it as something like an anonymous gift whose giver is lacking. Does this gift still remain a gift?"<sup>58</sup> This is a question of utmost relevance for the present reflection: the study is propelled by the notion that anonymous and elusive gift-givers (e.g., God, *tehom*, *kehôra*) co-gift creation. As a phenomenologist, Marion affirms that the gift remains freely given in the context of an indeterminate giver. The decision about the giver is wholly inscribed in undecidability. Marion emphasizes the essential anonymity of the giver: "So that 'it gives' truly, the 'it' must still be thought in and on the basis of 'giving'; therefore, it must remain indeterminate and anonymous as such. Otherwise, it would inevitably turn into a being (indeed the supreme being). The enigma of the anonymous 'it' is the only thing to safeguard givenness."<sup>59</sup> According to a phenomenology of givenness, the giver's anonymity precedes any question of cause or origin.

Marion provides a number of examples to support the need for indeterminacy. A first instance applies to the empirically absent (or deceased) giver. The phenomenon of inheritance is offered: the givee receives from an absent or unknown giver. But doesn't the State receive the gift in return (by way of fees and taxes)? Yes: the inheritor repays "partially" and indirectly, but this repayment cannot be directed at the gift-giver, for the latter remains absent, lacking.<sup>60</sup> A second instance of bracketing the giver is witnessed in the giver's own "unconsciousness." Marion offers the incisive example of "the athlete, the artist, and

<sup>58</sup> Marion, BG, 95.

<sup>59</sup> Marion, BG, 37. Marion refers here to Heidegger's concept of the *es gibt* ("It gives"/"There is"), whose examination lies beyond the scope of the present study. Refer to Heidegger, "Time and Being," in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 1-24, 5f. For an excellent exposition of this concept, refer to Caputo, *AE*, 223-232; *PTJD*, 164-167.

<sup>60</sup> Marion, BG, 95. He explains: "I repay partially in an economic exchange what befell me as a gift; but I do not, however, repay the one who gave me the gift . . ."

the lover"; each of these figures gift their gift (athleticism, artistry, eros), while remaining basically unaware of what they have given, evidenced by the familiar question requesting self-assurance: was I good?<sup>61</sup> The giver withdraws in/from the gift. And so, Marion provides another "essential law of givenness: to give, it is necessary not to know oneself if one gives."<sup>62</sup> Straightaway, he recalls Matthew 6.3: "When you give alms, let your left hand be ignorant of what your right hand does."<sup>63</sup>

And so, not only would the givee not know from whom they receive, the giver knows not what they give. Marion explains that the absence of a giver leaves the decision about the giver's identity up to the givee: "By its very absence, the giver gives to the givee, besides the gift, the decision to identify who gives."<sup>64</sup> But why is undecidability crucial? Indeterminacy guards against circularity; as Horner explains: "undecidability offers some protection against return . . ."<sup>65</sup> After all, if the giver remains unknown, then the gift is unreturnable.

While I concur that undecidability and anonymity certainly offer some protection against return, one wonders whether the bracketing of the giver reduces the burden of indebtedness. Caputo argues that Marion's strategy of bracketing the identity of the gift-giver actually intensifies or compounds this debt: "It is trouble enough to owe an identifiable debt to an identifiable creditor, but to situate the whole of life within an horizon of insoluble debt to an anonymous donor seems

<sup>61</sup> Marion is incisive: "This indeed is why it is so important to the giver (athlete, lover, artist) that the pleasure given be confessed, acknowledged, spoken by its beneficiary; for the giver and the giver alone knows nothing about it. He [sic] has to hear confirmation that 'he was good,' that 'it was good,' that he climbed, ran, jumped, rode, touched, caressed well. He has to be assured that he 'gave it all' because he alone is unaware and should be unaware. He gives *himself* without knowing it." BG, 346-347, n. 38.

<sup>62</sup> Marion, BG, 98.

<sup>63</sup> The NRSV translates this verse as "when you give alms, do not let your left hand *know* what your right hand is doing . . ."

<sup>64</sup> Marion, BG, 101. Note that the words "who gives" may better represent the giver's anonymity by its modification to "who/what gives" or "what/who gives."

<sup>65</sup> Horner, RGG, 201.

even worse.<sup>66</sup> One cannot repay an anonymous gift-giver, and, even if one repays, this repayment can never be made in kind, for the gift precedes—and is—life itself: how could one repay the gift of life?

Leaving aside, for a little while, the dilemma of indebtedness and the possibility of its resolution, I now turn to the third element that is phenomenologically reduced: the gift itself. As radical as it sounds, Marion provides a convincing argument. The gift is no longer considered according to the horizon of beingness or objectness. Examples are given: the gift of a promise or reconciliation, friendship or love, blessing or curse, and so on. These irreal gifts are differentiated from the objects that symbolize them. Marion is certainly compelling when identifying gifts that exceed—or are otherwise than—the objects that represent them. He provides three examples: the gifts of power, the self, and one's word (or promise). Obviously, power is not a being or an object, but "a new and absolutely unique relation to each and every one of the uncountable and unmeasurable objects and beings."<sup>67</sup> In other words, the signs of power (crown, Cross, keys, etc.) do not give power but merely symbolize this conferring or transferring.

As for the gift of giving one's self (carnally, in marriage, etc.), Marion maintains that a handing-over of one's self in a context of objectification and exchange annuls the giftness of the gift.<sup>68</sup> The specific example of a wedding ring is offered here. As with the example of power (where a crown represents the gift), the ring attests to the gift-giving. Giving one's word also exceeds objectness or beingness: the promise affects objects but is itself irreal.<sup>69</sup> Hence, Marion is able to declare: "It is indeed a question of a gift—the truthfulness of a word energizing the intersubjective relation—which governs objects and beings, but of a gift that itself

<sup>66</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 214.

<sup>67</sup> Marion, *BG*, 104. He therefore names power a "mystery."

<sup>68</sup> Marion argues: "Appropriation and exchange interpret my body as the object that, by right, it never is. . . . The objectification of my body disqualifies it as gift. The more I deliver my body in exchange for reciprocity (reimbursement, economy), the less I give it. . . ." Marion, *BG*, 104-105.

<sup>69</sup> Marion, *BG*, 105.

is not given as an object or a being."<sup>70</sup> And so, the gift would exceed objectness or beingness. Marion expresses this notion in *The Idol and Distance*: "The gift itself consists uniquely in the act of receiving/giving, and in no other 'content' . . ."<sup>71</sup> And so, the gift itself seems to evade causality and commerce—and thereby retains its freedom. Horner elucidates: "The gift, as that which 'is decided' (or decides *itself*), need not be read economically but can be appreciated simply as the given. . . . In this way Marion maintains that the gift is outside any economy, outside any causality, and outside any agency."<sup>72</sup>

Marion's compelling thoughts on the gift itself nevertheless prompt a number of inter-related questions. First, I have already noted that Derrida argues that symbolic gifts do not elude the gift-paradox: even symbolic gifts return.<sup>73</sup> Gift-symbols such as crowns and rings, while symbolizing gifts that are no-thing, are nevertheless identifiers of gifts (power, love) that instigate counter-gifts. Even symbolic gifts prompt circulation.

Perhaps a more compelling query is how Marion's phenomenology would negotiate the possibility that such symbolic gifts are also gifts *per se*. In other words, how would his thinking negotiate the notion that every-thing is also a gift? In short, is every given a gift? There are moments in *Being Given* which posit an equivalence between the given and gift, between givenness and the gift, and between giving and gifting.<sup>74</sup> The ambiguity or undecidability in Marion's treatment of these concepts is reflected in the commentaries that elucidate his work. Horner recognizes the complexity of this issue: "we enter immediately the somewhat murky waters of Marion's debate with Derrida and Greisch about the link between givenness, the

<sup>70</sup> Marion, *BG*, 106. He provides other examples of gifts without objectness or beingness throughout the text, such as the gifts of life, death, peace, time, meaning, and so on.

<sup>71</sup> Marion, *ID*, 170.

<sup>72</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 136.

<sup>73</sup> Refer to Derrida, *GT*, e.g., 11f, 24, 107.

<sup>74</sup> On the equivalence: (1) between the given and the gift, refer to *BG*, 61-62, 67, 70, 252; (2) between givenness and the gift, *BG*, 76, 84, 100; and, (3) between giving and gifting, *BG*, 246.

given, and the gift.”<sup>75</sup> In an excellent summary of Marion’s theological and phenomenological corpus, Carlson’s writing reflects the ambiguous relation between givenness and gifting in Marion’s work.<sup>76</sup>

Now, the question of this relation develops into a major issue—perhaps the most important—at the Villanova exchange between Derrida and Marion, and therefore warrants some discussion. The question over a kind of equivalence between the given and the gift is evidenced (at least once) in the exchange itself; at one point, Marion states: “phenomena suddenly appear as *gifts or givens* themselves . . .”<sup>77</sup> There is no equivocation by Marion as to the question of whether every gift is a given (*contra* Augustine); the priority of the given is evidenced when a phrase by Derrida, “every *Gegebenheit* [given] as gift,” is corrected by Marion by being reversed: “Every gift as *Gegebenheit*.”<sup>78</sup> Marion affirms that every gift is a given. But what is crucial for the present enquiry is whether Marion thinks *every given is a gift*.

As Schmitz notes, we usually distinguish a “given” from a “gift.” Derrida maintains this distinction throughout the Villanova exchange. At the very beginning of the debate, Derrida suggests: “What we are going to discuss, that is the gift, perhaps is not homogeneous with *Gegebenheit*.”<sup>79</sup> Derrida is interested in what “gift” means. He questions the “semantic continuity” between a “given” and a “gift” and emphatically recognizes their difference. Derrida emphasizes: “As soon as a gift—not a *Gegebenheit*, but a gift—as soon as a gift is identified as a gift, with the *meaning*

<sup>75</sup> Homer, RGG, 138. Jean Greisch accuses Marion of sneaking theology into phenomenology. Refer to Greisch, “Index sui et non dati,” in *Transversalités: Revue de L’Institut Catholique de Paris* 70 (April-June 1999): 27-54. On the question of the relation between Marion’s theology and his phenomenology, also refer to Dominique Janicaud, *La phénoménologie éclatée* (Combas: Éditions de l’éclat, 1998), “L’herméneutique dans la ‘phénoménologie comme telle,’” in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 96.1 (1991): 43-63; also refer to Janicaud and others (including Marion), *Phenomenology and the ‘Theological Turn’: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

<sup>76</sup> On three occasions to his Introduction to Marion’s *The Idol and Distance*, Thomas A. Carlson employs the equivocation “gift or givenness.” Carlson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Marion, *ID*, xi-xxxix, xii (twice), xxvi [hereafter Carlson, *TJ*].

<sup>77</sup> Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 61; emphasis added.

<sup>78</sup> Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 71.

<sup>79</sup> Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 58.

of a gift, then it is canceled as a gift.”<sup>80</sup> For Derrida—as for most or all of us (westerners, at least)—“*Gegebenheit*” and “gift” do not have a semantic equivalence; and so, Derrida clearly follows the conventional practice of differentiating between a “given” and a “gift.”

The question of the concordance between a “given” and a “gift” remains unclear throughout the Villanova debate, even when Marion has an opportunity to clarify the issue. At one point in the discussion, Derrida alleges that Marion’s “deepest ambition” rests on an equivalence between a given and a gift, or, more accurately, that givens are “finally” gifts from God; Derrida elaborates his suspicion in the following manner:

My hypothesis concerns the fact that you [Marion] use or credit the word *Gegebenheit* with gift, with the meaning of gift, and this has to do with—I will not call this theological or religious—the deepest ambition of your thought. For you, everything that is given in the phenomenological sense, *gegeben*, *donné*, *Gegebenheit*, everything that is given to us in perception, in memory, in a phenomenological perception, is finally a gift to a finite creature, and is finally a gift of God. . . . The logic of *Etant donné*, finally, to me, is to reinterpret as a gift everything that a phenomenologist—or anyone, a scientist—says is given, is a given, a fact, something that we meet in perception, given to my intuition. I perceive this; it is a given. I did not produce this. I did not create this. . . . The finite subject does not create its object, it receives it, receptively. Receptivity is interpreted as precisely the situation of the created being, the creature, which receives everything in the world as something created. So it is a gift. Everything is a gift.”<sup>81</sup>

To begin with, Derrida is aware of the risk of his interpretation of Marion’s work: in the context of a carefully worded hypothesis, Derrida barely masks the insinuation that a “theological or religious” “ambition” governs Marion’s phenomenology. Derrida ostensibly accuses Marion, who is (also) a Christian

<sup>80</sup> Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 59.

<sup>81</sup> Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 66.

theologian, of being intellectually motivated by his theological disposition. Derrida is therefore suspicious about Marion's methodological bracketing of the question of the gift-giver, and, hence, of the nature of every given as a gift. Marion, it seems, would decide that the gift-giver is God and that every given is gift-ed by God.

Now, even though Marion is at pains to enact a certain phenomenological neutrality when it comes to the "what" or "who" of the giver (as I noted above), one's reading is inevitably colored by his theological predisposition. His theological works do little to help any phenomenological neutrality: in the midst of a discussion on gifting in *The Idol and Distance*, Marion seems to identify every-thing with a divine gifting: "To receive the gift of God, as gift, requires of man [sic] that he himself immediately welcome the gift in its essence—as a giving act. . . . To receive the gift amounts to receiving the giving act, for God gives nothing except the movement of the infinite kenosis of charity, that is, everything."<sup>82</sup> Carlson notes: "It is a passage like this, of course, that allows one to understand Derrida's suspicion that, even in his phenomenological account of givenness, what Marion really wants to say is that everything is finally a gift from God."<sup>83</sup>

Unfortunately, Marion does not directly respond to Derrida's claim or charge. One sympathizes with Marion in his effort to separate his philosophy and theology of the gift, and it is perhaps *that* ambition that motivates his avoidance of, or equivocation towards, the question of creation's giver. Whatever sympathy or appreciation may be rendered, it is nevertheless difficult to postulate how Marion's phenomenology of givenness may be explicitly transposed and registered in the mode of an eco/theo/logy of gift/ing.

How would a believer who recognizes the legitimacy of undecidability negotiate the reception of everything as a gift? A more detailed response to this question is offered in the next chapter, but an outline may be sketched here. Horner provides guidance in this respect, since her recourse to undecidability in the context of faith and theology is remarkable:

<sup>82</sup> Marion, *ID*, 166.

<sup>83</sup> Carlson, *TI*, xxvii, n. 22.

An aporia, by definition, cannot be solved, but only resolved by a decision to act in a particular way, to act *as if* there were a way forward. I can never know whether or not I give or whether or not I receive, but I can believe it or desire it or act as if it were possible. . . . We will never know whether God gives, or what God gives; we can only believe. . . .<sup>84</sup>

The present aporetic follows this "as-ifness": I unambiguously propose that "Everything is a gift," but I recognize that this notion is an assumption. The assumption remains *modest* because it is recognized as such (its "what-ifness"). I recognize that my *decision* arises from—and proceeds through—undecidability, and that it is a decision that cannot be "verified" or "rejected" in the manner of a scientific thesis. It is a matter of faith—nothing more and certainly nothing less.

While Marion remains elusive in Villanova on the question of whether his "deepest ambition" is "theological or religious," that is certainly *my* ambition: I *believe* that every-thing is a gift somehow co/gift-ed by the biblical deity, but this *belief* is recognized as such. This ambition is deep but certainly not secret—nothing to be ashamed of. Shame would only result by denying or hiding this ambition. Today, there is certainly no shame in thinking tentatively, provisionally, experimentally—as long as one is willing to acknowledge that this is the case. On the contrary, can we approach these kinds of issues in any *other* way?

And so, Derrida states *imprecisely* in the above-quoted text the "what-if" upon which this thesis is grounded—imprecise because the passage is marked by a vocabulary of certainty symbolized by the word "finally" (which is uttered three times): there is nothing "final" about the assumption of the present work (nor of deconstruction itself).<sup>85</sup> By definition, an assumption or possibility (if recognized as such) would always remain inconclusive and open to modification, reversal, or

<sup>84</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 247. As an indicator of Horner's emphasis on undecidability, she employs it (and its derivative "undecidable") over forty times in *RGG*. Of course, Caputo's work on undecidability in a religious context is equally noteworthy; also refer to Manolopoulos, *WMT*

<sup>85</sup> Caputo reminds us: "Deconstruction, if there is such a thing, means to show that there is never a final word." *PTJD*, 218.

rejection. How could there be finality when one thinks and acts according to the gift's *as-if*?

### 3.1.3 Marion's Fluctuations

Has Marion been able to resolve the gift-aporia? Marion certainly provides an ingenious way to remove gifting from the domain of causal economy, as well as a way of thinking that decenters the knowing subject. To be sure, his phenomenology of givenness belongs to those manners of thinking (Pascalian, Heideggerian, Derridean, etc.) that attempt to free phenomena from the grasp of epistemological and technological totalizations. As Thomas A. Carlson aptly expresses it, Marion's "central effort" is "to free the absolute or unconditional (be it theology's God or phenomenology's phenomenon) from the various limits and preconditions of human thought and language . . ."<sup>86</sup> However, doubts arise as to whether Marion's post-metaphysical rendering of givenness resolves or dissolves the gift-aporia. As discussed above, his recourse to indebtedness, amplified by the possibility of an indebtedness towards a divine gift-giver, certainly obstructs the possibility of a clear-cut answer.

On the way to thinking the question of Marion's attempt to dissolve the gift-aporia, two more aspects of his thinking illuminate the way in which his negotiation of the gift becomes problematic: his bias against exchange and his concomitant desire for purity, and the more specific question of his treatment of the relation between the gift and un/knowing.

First of all, Marion certainly desires to disentangle the gift from an exchange economy, brought to light by Derrida's treatment of the question of the gift.<sup>87</sup> This disentanglement is figured in questionably extreme terms; Marion pronounces: "the gift can *never again* be envisaged within the system of exchange . . ."<sup>88</sup> He is intent on

<sup>86</sup> Carlson, *TI*, xii.

<sup>87</sup> Marion, *BG*, 74f.

<sup>88</sup> Marion, *BG*, 81; emphasis added.

"detaching the gift from economy and manifesting it according to givenness *purified* of all cause."<sup>89</sup> Bracketing any ecological merit of the following comment, Marion declares a pronounced disdain for the modern *polis*: "the *monstrous commercial city*, almost unlimited and without form, *oozing its own vulgarity, awash in items for sale*."<sup>90</sup> Marion also writes about commerce as a "first *failing*" of the gift.<sup>91</sup> It is little wonder, then, that Marion seeks the gift's "abstraction from commerce."<sup>92</sup>

As exchange economy is tied to present being (for the gift is identified in the present), Marion thereby derides being and presence: "the gift is given strictly to the degree that it *renounces* Being, that it makes an exception to presence . . ." and "the gift, if it is ever to be thought as such, *must* occur outside of presence . . ."<sup>93</sup> This vocabulary of assertion ("renounces," "must") is tempered by the following statement: "The present [gift] does not owe *everything* to presence," and I would definitely agree with this statement, for the gift is marked by presence *and* absence; *however*, Marion is tempted to return to a logic of totality by proposing that the gift "could quite possibly *owe it* [presence] *nothing at all*."<sup>94</sup> The gift "owes" presence insofar as the latter makes the gift known—while at the same time annulling it. *That* is the gift's aporeticity. Without the presence (identification, return) of the gift, it would not be one. After all, presence (identification, return) is one of the gift's two basic conditions. And so, the gift "owes" neither *nothing* nor *everything* to presence, but certainly *something*. The gift is indebted to presence—and simultaneously transgresses it.

Now, the question of Marion's bias against exchange, being, and presence, often marked by very assertive language, is a pertinent one, and I return to it shortly (§ 3.2.2). This much may be stated here: Marion's desire to exceed metaphysics—

<sup>89</sup> Marion, *BG*, 84.

<sup>90</sup> Marion, *BG*, 129; emphasis added.

<sup>91</sup> Marion, *BG*, 348, n. 46; emphasis added.

<sup>92</sup> Marion, *BG*, 251.

<sup>93</sup> Marion, *BG*, 79, 81; emphases added.

<sup>94</sup> Marion, *BG*, 80; emphases added.

and the gift-exchange that belongs to it—is a noble ambition. After all, there has been a traditional bias in philosophy and theology towards presence, identification, and exchange at the expense of absence, difference, and excess. When dealing with phenomena, any bias towards presence and identification leads to conceptual idolatry. But the immediate concern, however, is this: in his discourse on the gift, has Marion simultaneously privileged or overemphasized that which has been traditionally marginalized (excess, absence) at the expense of the metaphysical aspect of the gift?

To be sure, Marion's criticisms are not a common phenomenon in the sizeable *Being Given*; indeed, he *also* claims that "gratuity does not exclude exchange or reciprocity," and that exchange can be "honorable."<sup>95</sup> (And even the monstrous city holds for Marion a "morbid fascination.")<sup>96</sup> As the previous examination of the givee and giver demonstrates, one of the consummate expressions of commerce, indebtedness, re-appears in Marion's phenomenology. The givee or self is now overwhelmingly figured according to indebtedness: "The gift begins and, in fact, is achieved as soon as the giver imagines that he [sic] owes something—a gift without thing—to someone, therefore when he recognizes himself not only in the situation of a givee but also first as a debtor."<sup>97</sup> And the self or givee is now asked to return the gift: "The gifted [the self re-thought in terms of givenness] does not have language or *logos* as its property, but it finds itself endowed with them—as gifts that are shown only if it ["the gifted"] *regives them to their unknown origin.*"<sup>98</sup> The gift and givee are here inscribed in a vocabulary of return—of returning the gift to its "unknown origin." Elsewhere, Marion refers to "the event of *unknown cause.*"<sup>99</sup>

For a non-metaphysical thinker like Marion, this refiguration of givee and gift is described in seemingly (and surprisingly) metaphysical terms ("origin," "cause"),

<sup>95</sup> Marion, *BG*, 86.

<sup>96</sup> Marion, *BG*, 129.

<sup>97</sup> Marion, *BG*, 108; also refer to *BG*, 112.

<sup>98</sup> Marion, *BG*, 288; second emphasis added.

<sup>99</sup> Marion, *BG*, 170.

and Marion encourages the givee's re-gifting of the gift to the gift's unknown origin or cause. Even if gift-exchange is radically modified by emphasizing the anonymity of the giver, gifting nevertheless remains figured according to a logic of circularity. I, the recipient of the gift, am indebted: does this not draw gifting into a commercial exchange which is, at other points in *Being Given*, denounced as the gift's "first failing"? I return the gift, even if I do not know who/what gives. The gift-aporia requires returning.

Concomitant with Marion's criticism of exchange, presence, and being, is his pursuit of a "pure givenness" and a "pure given."<sup>100</sup> For Marion, gifting involves "pure loss."<sup>101</sup> He calls for a receptivity that is purely unilateral: "the receiver can no longer claim to possess or produce phenomena. It [the recipient or givee] no longer stands in a relation of possession to the phenomenon, but in a *purely* receiving relation . . ."<sup>102</sup> Does the recipient stand in a "purely receiving relation"? Is there absolutely *no* possession of the phenomenon? The nature of "possession" requires re-examination in the context of the gift-aporia: if the receiver can no longer claim to "possess" phenomena—even partially—how can these phenomena be partially recognized or known? If the gift-thing cannot be at least partially identified, then it cannot be identified as a gift (even if this identification paradoxically erases the gift-thing's giftness).

Interestingly, Marion's own writing testifies to partial possession; he himself acknowledges that phenomena—including gifts—may be partially known. The following quotations exhibit Marion's recognition of the possibility that a *pragma* may be *partially* grasped: "the recognition of the gift as gift" is something "which the givee can accomplish by knowing the gift (at least *partially*) . . ."<sup>103</sup> This partial

<sup>100</sup> Marion, *BG*, 188, 245; also refer to, e.g., *BG*, 91, 102.

<sup>101</sup> On "pure loss", refer to, e.g., *BG*, 79, 86, 89, 93. Marion also writes of "complete loss"; refer to, e.g., *BG*, 96, 98.

<sup>102</sup> Marion, *BG*, 249; emphasis added. Marion also seeks to purify the gift from the economically-contaminated empirical world when he writes of a gift which is "purified of its empirical blossoming . . ." *BG*, 74.

<sup>103</sup> Marion, *BG*, 101; emphasis added.

recognition of the gift is crucial: without it, the gift would not be perceived and received. Of course, the recipient does not *fully* possess phenomena. This is intimated by the word "first" in the following passage: "to see what gives itself, we must *first* renounce constituting and 'grasping' it (in the Cartesian sense), in favor of simply receiving it."<sup>104</sup> We *first* receive the phenomenon-gift, but we *also* grasp it. And so, there are two movements: reception and seizure—which is partial (limited).

The possibility of a partial knowledge is also promoted in the essay "In the Name": Marion not only confirms his support for "partial knowledge" but possibly exceeds it, by arguing for "adequate knowledge" of phenomena.<sup>105</sup> Two statements confirm this pro-epistemic position. Marion proclaims: "*Every thing in the world gains by being known—but God, who is not of the world, gains by not being known conceptually. The idolatry of the concept is the same as that of the gaze: imagining oneself to have attained God and to be capable of maintaining him [sic] under our gaze, like a thing of the world.*"<sup>106</sup> The second passage reads: "Comprehension suggests *adequate knowledge* as long as one is dealing with *things of the world.*"<sup>107</sup>

Bracketing momentarily (and then addressing only one aspect of) the theological dimension to these statements, the idea that "Every thing in the world gains by being known" raises a number of immediately relevant questions. First, what do *pragmata* gain by being known? From the perspective of an aporetic of gifting, the world's ability to be known is a good thing: knowing (grasping/constituting) things is essential to the gift-aporia. Without knowing the gift, the gift would go totally unrecognized. Knowledge is essential to the gift, even though the gift turns to *Gift* (poison) in its wake.

But what is meant by "adequate knowledge"? Even though Marion does not discuss the qualifying term ("adequate"), it intimates a kind of knowledge by *degree*.

<sup>104</sup> Marion, *BG*, 321; emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup> Incidentally, "In the Name" was presented at the same conference that hosted the exchange between Marion and Derrida ("On the Gift").

<sup>106</sup> Marion, *IN*, 34; emphasis added.

<sup>107</sup> Marion, *IN*, 37; emphases added.

In other words, we may have knowledge of phenomena, but this knowledge is not complete, for the phenomenon is ultimately elusive. The thing itself may be grasped to a certain degree. This is good news for the gift: if the phenomenon could be grasped *completely*, then it would not be a gift, for absolute mastery would erase its excess: absolute comprehension would reduce the gift to a strictly commercial entity. The aporetic gift requires a receptivity marked by knowing and not-knowing: only this dual capacity and movement would secure the gift-thing's giftness.

The statement "Every thing gains by being known" elicits a further question: is it always or only the case that what-is "gains by being known"? Surely the negative effects of science and technology (acts-of-knowing *par excellence*), which include ecological destruction and deterioration, are based on the human desire and ability to know *everything*.<sup>108</sup> Hence, the world does not always "gain" by becoming more known by humans. On the contrary (and at the same time), the human desire and ability to know a thing presents the risk and realization of exploitation, manipulation, and annihilation of human and other-than-human others.

Thus, to know the other opens the possibilities of *gain and loss*—and the ecological crisis is a stark sign of the manifestation of the latter. According to the logic and vocabulary of gifting, knowledge is a "gift" in its two basic and opposing meanings: "present" and "poison." To be sure, the present aporetic is not simplistically anti-scientific and anti-technology. But what is being asserted is that science and technology carry within them both positive and negative possibilities.<sup>109</sup> Unfortunately—tragically—the negative possibilities manifest themselves in ecologically disastrous ways.

And so, both the gift and the world will only gain when human beings acknowledge that circumscription is not—and should not be—*absolute*. Corporeal

<sup>108</sup> Modern science and technology may be described as "acts-of-knowing *par excellence*" because their ventures are radically effective—that is, have an enormous effect on the world (to the point of potentially disfiguring it)—because they substantially circumscribe things. Modern technology would not be the kind of problem that it is (of course, it is also marked by positive aspects), if it were not so effective.

<sup>109</sup> Refer to, e.g., Heidegger, *QCT*, 15.

entities-in-relation have aspects to them that elude us (such as their infinitude and being).<sup>110</sup> Things are marked by both the knowable *and the unknowable*. Herein lies that which is most pertinent for this study: if we can admit that unknowability marks the phenomenon, then it is plausible to propose that the gift(s)-of-creation are gifts because they are marked by *both* circumscribable *and* uncircumscribable elements, respectively contributing to the recognizability and unrecognizability of the gift. Certainly the present study assumes that a thing may be a gift precisely because it is known—known or perceived as gift. But it can only be a gift if it is also inscribed in mystery: *the gift is divided—known and unknown*.

Hence, the requirement to modify Marion's statement in the following way: "every thing [-gift] in the world gains by being known" *and yet* "every thing [-gift] in the world gains" by remaining *unknown*. The gift-thing's excess ensures that the gift does not completely enter the circle of exchange or knowledge. The thing's inability to be known is what saves its gift-aspect, even though its giftness is paradoxically eroded by knowing. To perceive a gift is to both know it and not-know it. "Comprehension" of the matrix of beings may be "adequate" but cannot be *comprehensive*—and this is a good thing: it keeps the gift safe. Despite the exaggerated claims of scientism and fundamentalism—for they are both discourses and practices that pretend to Know—the thing itself always slips away.<sup>111</sup> While the knowing subject may certainly but momentarily clutch the *pragma*, it cannot circumscribe *all* its aspects in its grasp—the thing itself resists absolute accessibility.

The above-quoted statements in "On the Name" indicate a failure on Marion's behalf to register the fact that mystery marks not *only* divinity but *also* "every thing in the world." Despite the astounding respect for the phenomenon registered by Marion in *Being Given*, the theological work "In the Name" does not

<sup>110</sup> Some of these aspects may perhaps be thought but exceed human comprehension. Two discursive examples suffice: Pascal's insight into the inner infinity of things, and Heidegger's extended meditation on the ontological difference (beings/Being). One could also underline how relation and context further confound the unrealistic notion that a thing may be completely knowable.

<sup>111</sup> Refer to Caputo, *FL*.

sufficiently register the excess that marks even the most "mundane" humanly made things—like plastic bags. Caputo questions this bifurcation between knowledge of the divine and the corporeal:

With everything other than God, Marion contends, we always mean or intend more than is actually given to us, and our experience is always forced to play catch-up with our intention. But with God, more is given to us than we can ever mean or say, so that words and concepts are always at a loss to express what has been given. With the name of God, the shortcoming has to do with the failure of the concept, intention, or signification, which is always limited and imperfect, not with givenness, which is excessive and overflowing.<sup>112</sup>

I contend that, if/since it is a gift, creation is (likewise) "excessive and overflowing." Like the gift of God, the gift of creation overwhelms the knowing subject.

What may be gleaned from this review of Marion's thoughts on exchange, purity, and knowledge? He seems to fluctuate between a disdain for exchange, and a desire for purity; he fluctuates between the need for unknowing and partial knowing. Despite Marion's desire to resolve the gift-aporia, it nevertheless returns. How, then, can the gift's aporeticity be respected and reflected in our thinking? Marion's fluctuation indicates a way forward: our reception of, and interaction with, the gift may be governed by a logic and language of *oscillation*.

### 3.2 OSCILLATION AND OTHERWISE

Even when phenomenologically rethinking gifting, our thinking is apparently (and perhaps inevitably) paralyzed by the gift-aporia. Attempts to "break free" from it appear to land us deeper into its paradoxicality. Perhaps this *paralysis* provokes a

<sup>112</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 194.

certain movement—the motion of oscillation.<sup>113</sup> According to the *OED* definition, to oscillate is “To swing backwards and forwards, like a pendulum; to vibrate; to move to and fro between two points. To fluctuate between two opinions, principles, purposes, etc., each of which is held in succession; to vary between two limits which are reached alternately.”<sup>114</sup>

I have already intimated that oscillation appears to be a way that reflects the gift’s irresolvable tension. We should not favor one of the elements at the exclusion of the other, for any exclusion dissolves the gift itself. The maintenance of the tension via oscillation reflects and respects the thing’s giftness. The “both/and” of oscillation guards against exclusion and reification.

One may find traces of an oscillational thinking intimated by, or explicitly at work in, certain thinkers analyzed in the present discourse. The previous subsection demonstrated that Marion fluctuates between the two aspects of the gift, and this fluctuation may be rethought as a way of pointing towards the path of oscillation (§ 3.1.3). The present section examines ways in which certain aspects of the writings of the abovementioned thinkers help to illuminate the nature and work of oscillation. First, the word “oscillation” is employed by Webb in *The Gifting God*, and I examine how he casts oscillation there (§ 3.2.1). Next, I critique those moments in Caputo’s work that reveal his bias against indebtedness, but is offset by his recourse to responsibility; I also discuss aspects of his thinking of metaphysics that support my case for oscillation (§ 3.2.2). Third, I turn to Derrida, whose *Given Time* certainly makes room for oscillation, but his remarks in “On the Gift” suggest that he is not only unwilling to maintain the gift’s tension, but, on the contrary, seems ready to abandon the gift (§ 3.2.3).

<sup>113</sup> According to the *NODE*, to oscillate is to “move or swing back and forth . . . waver between extremes of opinion, action, or quality . . .” *NODE*, 1312,

<sup>114</sup> *OED*.

### 3.2.1 Webb On Oscillation

Fortuitously for us, Webb comes to discover the significance of “oscillation.” However, he construes it in a rather negative light.<sup>115</sup> His most significant remark on this subject stipulates: “I [Webb] argue that the oscillation between gratuity and return produces theories of giving [including, presumably, Derrida’s] that make gift giving an increasingly difficult activity to understand, let alone practice.”<sup>116</sup> This text indicates that oscillation is a hindrance to an understanding of gifting. *And rightly so:* even though there is nothing wrong with the desire to understand gifting, thinkers like Derrida and Marion have demonstrated, in different ways, why the gift is ultimately a question and phenomenon that exceeds understanding. As the oscillational Marion insists: “A gift . . . does not require *first* that one explain it, but indeed that one receive it.”<sup>117</sup> (The remark oscillates between “first” receiving the gift and then also explaining it.)

Hence, it is somewhat necessary to posit that theorizations involving an oscillation between excess and exchange have become “increasingly difficult to understand”: the gift will *always* be difficult to understand because it is an aporia, marked by two diverging aspects which complicate our thinking. But should this be a *criticism* of theorizations that explore the gift’s aporeticity? On the contrary, perplexity is a proper response to the gift-aporia. After all, *aporias are difficult*—by definition. Hence, Webb’s charge or observation that oscillational accounts of gift/ing render such accounts difficult to comprehend should be understood as an indication that such theories are on the right path, a path that is nevertheless difficult, dizzying. The gift, after all, induces a certain madness.

<sup>115</sup> Coincidentally (and fortuitously), “oscillation” is prevalent in Keller’s *Face of the Deep*: the word arises over twenty times in that text—and usually in very positive terms.

<sup>116</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 31. Note, too, the following statement: “In the first chapter, I [Webb] argued that the act of giving—oscillating between the extremes of excess and exchange—was a difficult accomplishment . . .” Webb, *TGG*, 54.

<sup>117</sup> Marion, *GWB*, 162; emphasis added.

But does a Derridean aporetics of gifting entail that its *practice* is rendered “increasingly difficult”? Now, as I have already explained, the gift occurs on the planes of intentionality and pre-consciousness. The gift’s practice on the level of consciousness may certainly be questioned by those aware of its paradoxicality, which certainly extends beyond aporeticians of the gift. As Webb acknowledges: “Everybody seems to know that giving is calculated, not spontaneous, and structured (and thereby canceled) by the expectation of an equivalent return.”<sup>118</sup> For instance, the now-almost-obligatory practice of bringing a bottle of wine to a dinner party, for instance, can be perceived in all its paradoxicality: it is certainly a gift, but a gift that is *exchanged* for a meal. And so, the practice of gifting can generate a degree of suspicion or cynicism.

However, gifting may also take place on an extra-conscious level. Gifts may be given without our knowing it. By definition, this gifting beyond intentionality exceeds any possible suspicion or cynicism. The gift’s excess exceeds any difficulty associated with gifting on a conscious level. *Furthermore*, I argue for the possibility that gifting transcends human interactivity, indeed, that human interactivity is itself gift-ed. In other words, gifting may extend to material creation. All things-in-relation gift to each other, transcending suspicion and cynicism. According to this understanding of the gift, our practices towards the creation-matrix may be positively refigured (as I delineate in the next chapter).

Now, Webb argues that oscillation is the result of a lack in modern discourses about gifting: “the task of doing justice to both excess and reciprocity demands a framework that modern theories do not provide. As a result, the modern discourse on gift giving oscillates between extravagance and exchange.”<sup>119</sup> Webb offers a trinitarian framework. The question as to whether this framework proves ultimately incisive was questioned above (§ 2.2.2-3), but, on a more fundamental level, one may propose that the gift’s essential framework is its own aporeticity: the play between freedom and identification is the gift’s frame of reference. Within this

<sup>118</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 4.

<sup>119</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 31.

frame, it is therefore to be expected that modern discourses on gifting, immersed as they are, consciously or unconsciously, in the gift’s paradoxicality, would oscillate—though perhaps not rigorously enough—between exchange and extravagance. And it is precisely the gift’s frame that necessitates a certain (rigorous) oscillation.

I am now better placed to summarize some characteristics of a rigorous oscillation. This summary is aided by a statement provided by Webb regarding the task of theology in its thinking of gifting. While citing the following text may have been of some benefit earlier in the thesis, its full import may now be exposed:

theology must deconstruct the tendency (inherent in extreme polarizations) of collapsing one term in this binary pair into the other—without synthesizing the two terms into some organic whole, compartmentalizing them in an attempt to preserve the purity of each, or replacing them with a middle or mediating term.<sup>120</sup>

Consider deconstructive theology’s multi-faceted work. First, Webb insists against the collapse of either excess or exchange into its other. This insistence should be affirmed: otherwise, the gift would not be one. The present aporia insists on oscillation rather than destruction. Second, there should be no organic synthesis: by definition, the movement of oscillation is otherwise than synthesis or sublation. The third regulation, which warns against compartmentalization, is somewhat problematic: it may be argued that I have “compartmentalized” excess and exchange during my analysis; however, analysis demands a certain degree of loosening up (*ana-lysis*) if not compartmentalization. To be sure, any differentiation in the present work is (*pace* Marion) not an attempt to “purify” each aspect of the gift, for the gift’s paradoxicality lies precisely in their inter-contamination. The gift is un/done *internally*. Finally, does oscillation replace the two aspects of gifting “with a middle or mediating term”? On the contrary, my insistence on oscillation denotes the opposite: that one should not abandon either aspect of the gift.

<sup>120</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 159, n. 2.

Oscillation, by definition, involves the movement between two aspects or "points"—the quotation marks denote their inter-contamination.

And so, oscillation does not collapse, organically synthesize, or mediate. And, if it "compartmentalizes," it *also* inter-contaminates. It seems that deconstructive theology itself points in the direction of oscillation.

### 3.2.2 Caputo's Intimations

At the risk of anachronism, one may pose the question we now face: does Caputo oscillate? Different texts oscillate between oscillation and bias. I briefly examine here sentiments expressed in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* and "Apostles of the Impossible." In the former work, Caputo marks a discussion of the question of the gift and indebtedness with an explicit avowal "to maintain the greatest possible tension between fidelity and infidelity (*Points*, 150-151), between the circle and the gift, to be paralyzed by this aporia and then to make a move (when it is impossible)."<sup>121</sup> Caputo here encourages the maintenance of "the greatest possible tension." And, the greater the tension, the better the oscillation.

Caputo's recognition of this tension, and the dual responsibility that comes with it, is clearly expressed when he explains that "the paradox of Abraham" is a "paralyzing aporia" in which we are constantly "having to respond without reserve to the singularity of the *tout autre* while at the same time meeting [our] responsibilities to the generality of the law. . . ."<sup>122</sup> Hence, the vigilant Derrida and Caputo do not succumb to any simplistic one-sidedness: while they plead for graciousness and forgiveness over calculation and indebtedness, they are not prepared to do away with the circle, duty, and debt altogether.

Caputo strives to maintain the greatest tension, but sometimes this intention becomes obscured. For instance, the following passage moves according to a

<sup>121</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 184. Caputo refers to Derrida's *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

<sup>122</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 211.

vocabulary of degree, even though it begins by excluding the circular (commerce, duty, debt): "Forgiveness is the ultimate release from *all* economies . . . but *not* into a simple exteriority from the circle. Rather, forgiving loosens the circle of credit and debt. . . . Forgiveness alone gives me responsibility *without* duty, duty *without* debt, debt *without* being tied up [*reli-gare*]."<sup>123</sup>

The tension is also relaxed according to the following remark, in which Caputo gets to the gist of *The Gift of Death*; hence, it is important to remember that the remark may be more a reflection of the content of that text rather than a clear-cut delineation of Caputo's thinking: "The point of *Donner la mort* then is not to undo faith but to insist on the an-economic character of faith, that faith is *always* a matter of the gift and giving, not a transaction between a creditor and debtor."<sup>124</sup> Is faith *always* about gifting and, by implication, *never* about transacting? Would faith be strictly an-economic? Can faith be *that* pure? Isn't faith marked or inter-contaminated by *gratuity and its other*? I return to this line of inquiry when I explore the question of indebtedness to God for the gift of creation (§ 4.2.4), but I offer here the following possibility: that faith itself, like the gift itself, is aporetic insofar as it is marked by uncalculability *and* calculation. Faith, it seems, may be more Matthean (calculating *and* forgiving) than Abrahamic (purely extravagant).

To be sure, passionate writers like Caputo and Derrida are moved by the impossibility of the pure gift (and a pure faith)—and who wouldn't be? Who wouldn't want to uncalculatingly give unconditional gifts? Who wants to be burdened by the otherwise-well-meaning gifts of others? As I mentioned in § 3.1.1, Caputo and Derrida—and not only them—desire a *more* forgiving and *less* calculating gifting. After all, they are spurred on by deconstruction, which, if there is such a thing, would be "[p]ure morality," not the hypocritical morality of the

<sup>123</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 227; emphases added. For another instance where calculation is excluded from debt and responsibility, refer to Caputo, *PTJD*, 222, where Caputo refers to Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>124</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 218; (second) emphasis added.

concrete and violent messianisms.<sup>125</sup> Amid their passions for the impossible, the pure, the forgivable, and the peaceful, what saves Derridean and Caputocean thinking from any pure and simple one-sidedness is their own remarkable recognition that we cannot “escape” the circle (metaphysics, the subject, debt).

While Caputo’s intention in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* is the maintenance of the tension between the gift and its rupture, perhaps he leans towards the latter, though he has good cause, in light of the commercialism that marks gifts and faiths. *Nevertheless*, we should not relinquish the tightest tension possible, and this means—even within the midst of the noble call for a *more* an-economic gifting—that we should not silence or exclude calculation and indebtedness *outright*. The notion of debt should not be completely severed from the question of the gift (if such severance were possible), if one wants to remain faithful to the gift and its aporeticity.

Now, does “Apostles of the Impossible,” wherein Caputo expounds his Villanovan concerns about Marion’s recourse to indebtedness, maintain this tension? Does this text oscillate between the circle and its rupture? First of all, that text risks being contaminated by the desire for purity that marks Marion’s thinking (and also Derrida’s—refer to the next subsection). Caputo takes up this vocabulary of infection in his Derridean critique of Marion’s bias towards indebtedness. Caputo explains: “Derrida is worried about the *contamination of credere*, faith in the gift, by credit, which makes the gift a medium of exchange . . .” and “he [Marion] has introduced an *alien* horizon, a *substance foreign* to the terms of donation . . .”<sup>126</sup>

A number of comments are relevant here. Obviously, Caputo writes on behalf of Derrida, and so it is difficult to gauge from this text whether Caputo would excessively bias purity over exchange and contamination.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, one recalls that, in previous works, Caputo openly declares his suspicion towards

<sup>125</sup> *PTJD*, 221; Caputo cites Derrida’s “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering,’” trans. David Wood, in Derrida, *ON*, 3-31, 133, n. 3.

<sup>126</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 212, 213; emphases added except “*credere*.”

<sup>127</sup> Caputo frequently qualifies his statements with the phrase: “From Derrida’s point of view . . .” *AI*, 213, 214 (x3).

the pure: “I suspect purity generally,” he remarks in *Against Ethics*, and, in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, he warns that “nothing is safe, pure, clean, uncontaminated,” and that “nothing is ‘simply exterior’ to the circle of self-interest.”<sup>128</sup> Hence, it is unclear to what extent Caputo would be “against” circularity. In light of his previous comments, it is unlikely that he has succumb to this desire for purity. Once again, it may be a matter of a slight bias (and desire for) uncalculating gratuity and ceaseless forgiveness. (And one may forgive him for that.)

Despite the risk of invoking a vocabulary of contamination in “Apostles of the Impossible,” there is nevertheless an intimation of a kind of crucial oscillational logic at work in that essay. Caputo implies that exchange (and therefore presence, identification, knowledge, etc.) is not to be denied in any exaggerated sense. It occurs at the point where he links the gift with the “mystical rose”: “the gift must be like the rose, without why.”<sup>129</sup> At first reading, one would think that this coupling affirms the Derridean and Marionitic insistence on purifying the gift of exchange: the why-less rose challenges the metaphysical desire for origin or cause.

However, the evocation of the rose should not be understood as a pure and simple protest against causal thinking: in an earlier note in the same essay (dealing with another aspect of the Villanova exchange), Caputo states (with apparent irony): “I think that Marion depends heavily upon the late Heidegger, despite his critique of Heidegger’s second idolatry in *God without Being*. Marion’s ‘gift’ looks a lot like the mystical rose that blossoms without why, free from the principle of sufficient reason and all causality, that Heidegger comments upon in *The Principle of Reason* . . .”<sup>130</sup> Is it possible to read this note as indicative of a suspicion towards the

<sup>128</sup> *AE*, 53; *PTJD*, 225; also refer to *AE*, ch. 6 (titled “Almost Perfect Fools”).

<sup>129</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 213. The phrase is coined by Angelus Silesius (a.k.a. Johann Scheffler, 1624-1677) in *The Cherubic Wanderer*, Bk. I: 289, trans. Maria Shradly (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 54 [hereafter Silesius, *TCW*], and recalled by Heidegger in “Lecture Five” of *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 32-40, 35f. Caputo discusses, in some detail, the rose, Silesius, Eckhart, and Heidegger in *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (Athens, Ohio: University of Ohio Press, 1978) [hereafter Caputo, *MEH*], ch. 3.

<sup>130</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 220, n. 29.

notion of the rose that is completely without why (reason, causality, identification)? This much may be stated here: if the rose is a gift, and the gift may be partially grasped but nevertheless elusive, then the rose cannot be completely without why.

One locates a second textual indication of a resistance towards a fully-fledged abandonment of exchange (and presence, knowledge, etc.) in "Apostles of the Impossible." Caputo is wary of Marion's passionate opposition in "In the Name" towards the Arians and their metaphysics of presence. Caputo states (with further irony): "Far from being the inalterable fate of theology, or mystical theology, Marion contends, the 'metaphysics of presence' is actually a heresy. True theology is always a 'theology of absence,' not a metaphysics of presence."<sup>131</sup> It seems that Caputo calls into question Marion's elevation of the thinking of absence and a concomitant degradation of (the metaphysics of) presence.

Hence, in "Apostles of the Impossible," one finds indications that Caputo seems to acknowledge the danger involved with privileging one aspect (absence, excess, unknowability) at the expense of the other (presence, exchange, and knowledge). But why is such a bias against reason and causality questionable? Why shouldn't the rose and the gift be thought according to absence and unknowability? At the risk of sounding scandalously metaphysical, one must ask: are the rose and the gift *absolutely without why*? Who can say whether the gift and the rose are completely "why-less"? On the contrary, shouldn't we offer the following possibility: that the gift and the rose may be *with-and-without why*—as paradoxical as this possibility seems?

Obviously, this line of inquiry confronts the powerful destabilization of metaphysical modes of thinking (such as causality and the privileging of the present) heralded by thinkers like Heidegger, Derrida, and Marion. Unfortunately, an exposition and examination of the much-needed critiques of the metaphysics of presence lies beyond the domain of this thesis, even though the present study

<sup>131</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 218, n. 9. Caputo adds: "... Does not this condemnation of presence itself imply a desire for presence...? Does it not imply a politics of presence, an onto-theo-politics, a policing operation from which theology does not sufficiently distance itself?" This question is also broached in Manolopoulos, *WMT*.

borders this crucial question. However, what may be posited here is that these critiques nevertheless demand a certain self-critique—at least in light of the gift-aporia, and its relation to the metaphysical. Any absolute suspension of reason and all causality from a thinking of gifting appears to be an *excessive* move. The abandonment of metaphysics, the denial of knowledge, of identification, of exchange (if such things were possible), would be an extreme gesture, even if it is a noble gesture that means to save the "pure" gift.

Why would the denial of metaphysics be extreme? Because the gift requires that it be identified in the present, even though the gift nevertheless both exceeds it and is un/done by it. Otherwise, the recipient could not be able to identify it. Perhaps the gift and the rose are *quasi*-mystical: knowable and unknowable, inscribed in exchange and beyond it, identifiable and elusive, real and hyper-real. The rose and the gift need to be identified in the present: otherwise they would not be known. And so, our reception of the gift and the rose requires an oscillating receptivity: a recognition that is nevertheless exceeded.

Caputo appears to sense the dangers of both an excessive anti-metaphysical "mysticism of gifting" (my phrase) and a "metaphysics of absence" (Caputo's phrase). However, in a text like "Apostles of the Impossible," Caputo does not move beyond this hesitancy, which would demand that the gift be explicitly affirmed in *all* its madness: that the gift is somehow—contradictorily, paradoxically, miraculously—marked by both gratuity and circularity, freedom and exchange, elusiveness and identification. If a rose is a gift (and if all the roses in the world are gifts, and if all the world is a gift), then I propose that it is a gift because it *blossoms with and without why*.

### 3.2.3 Derrida's Saving/Abandon (Almost)

Does Derrida's writing oscillate between freedom and identification or does it ever become static or biased? In short, has Derrida's writing—a writing that has scandalously exposed the gift's aporeticity—remained faithful to the aporeticity of

the gift? A study of the question of oscillation in relation to Derrida's work may begin with the very text (*Given Time*) that provokes the necessity of a double movement. While *Given Time* calls attention to the gift's gratuity, it does not deny or eliminate the question of circular economy.

A series of statements reflects Derrida's acknowledgment of exchange. A first affirms the relation between the two aspects of the gift: "Now the gift, *if there is any*, would no doubt be related to economy. . . . But is not the gift, if there is any, *also* that which interrupts economy?"<sup>132</sup> The term "also" belongs to the lexicon of oscillation (which also includes phrases like "on the one hand . . .," "at the same time," etc.): the gift is not only "related to [exchange and money] economy" but it *also* interrupts it. When thinking gifting, one should think it in terms of commerce *as well as* its other.

The following statement is also instructive in this regard: "One should not necessarily flee or condemn circularity. . . . One must, in a *certain way* of course, inhabit the circle, turn around in it, live there a feast of thinking, and the gift, the gift of thinking, would be no stranger there."<sup>133</sup> One should not run away from exchange (assuming evasion were possible—and even noble); on the contrary, one should turn around in it "in a *certain way*." Oscillation is just such a movement: it turns around in the circle but also desires and thinks its interruption or counter-movement. Oscillation is "no stranger" when it deals with commerce, *and yet* is also at home with its other: the unconditional. Surely oscillation is one "*certain way*" of moving and dwelling in the circle that nevertheless allows one to move and dwell in the gift's other home (linearity, freedom, excess). Oscillation moves from one home to the other, never settling down. Like the gift, or the prodigal: it returns, and leaves again, and so on.

I point to one more text to demonstrate that *Given Time* reflects the aporeticity of the gift by oscillating between its contrary aspects. As I noted in my Introduction, Derrida explains that gift/ing would have to occur on a plane that

<sup>132</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 7; second emphasis added.

<sup>133</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 9.

exceeds human subjectivity, for subjectivity necessarily inscribes the gift in exchange. Does this mean that human agency must be suspended when thinking gifting? No: "There must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or disorder, and there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must—miraculously, graciously—agree with each other."<sup>134</sup> There must be the characteristics of excess ("chance," "unconsciousness," and so on) and the characteristics of constitution ("intentional freedom," consciousness, and so on), and these two aspects "miraculously, graciously" acquiesce. Oscillation respects and reflects this miraculous and gracious acquiescence.

Does Derrida continue to maintain this kind of oscillating movement when confronted with the question of the gift-aporia? Does this oscillational thinking transpire during his discussion with Marion at Villanova? A number of passages in "On the Gift" indicate a cessation of the tension. In a passage where Derrida summarizes Marion's position on the gift, and having just mentioned *Given Time*, Derrida argues:

As soon as a gift—not a *Gegebenheit*, but a gift—as soon as a gift is identified as a gift, with the meaning of a gift, then it is canceled as a gift. . . . So I dissociate the gift from the present. . . . The event called gift is totally heterogeneous to theoretical identification, to phenomenological identification. . . . The gift is totally foreign to the horizon of economy, ontology, constative statements, and theoretical determination and judgment. But in doing so, I did not intend to simply give up the task of accounting for the gift, for what one calls gift, not only in economy but even in Christian discourse. In *The Gift of Death*, I try to show the economy at work, the economic axiomatic at work, in some Christian texts.<sup>135</sup>

In his effort to save the gift from the totalizing grip of knowledge (which would undo it), Derrida participates in a kind of totalizing thinking himself. He employs a

<sup>134</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 123.

<sup>135</sup> Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 59.

vocabulary of totalization: "The event called gift is *totally* heterogeneous to theoretical identification," and "The gift is *totally* foreign to the horizon of economy, ontology, knowledge . . ." These kinds of assertions are problematic. As I have argued above, the identification of the gift is essential, even if this identification is incomplete and overrun by excess. If the gift were *absolutely* "foreign to the horizon of economy, ontology, knowledge, constative statements, and theoretical determination and judgment," then it would remain *absolutely* imperceptible and one would wonder how the word "gift" even enters language.

When Derrida decides to "dissociate the gift from the present," judging by the totalizing tone of the text, it seems this dissociation would be a *clean cut*. But oscillation teaches otherwise: the present is essential to the gift. Without presence—as "impure" as it may be—the gift would not be received as a gift. Hence, the gift and the present *do* associate, even though this "association" is marked by an aporeticity that leaves us overwhelmed. In this state of perplexity, Derrida had previously (and rightly) named this association or agreement "miraculous" and "gracious." The above-quoted passage demonstrates that, during the Villanova exchange, Derrida refuses to figure the gift in all its aporeticity by denying it its presence (exchange, circularity, constitutability).

The totalizing vocabulary that marks the above-quoted passage therefore requires correction. Lexicons of traversal and degree seem to more satisfactorily gauge the gift's aporeticity: the gift *traverses* presence and absence; the gift is *partially* open to theoretical identification. Thinking according to logics of traversal or degree redresses this bias against presence. I noted above how Schmitz's *The Gift: Creation* employs this kind of vocabulary (§ 2.1.2). Likewise, Horner utilizes the lexicon of traversal, and especially at a very interesting moment in her work: when describing how *Derrida* attempts to think the gift. During a discussion of Derrida's text-gift to Lévinas, "At This Very Moment in This Text Here I Am," Horner explains: "Derrida's gift springs from a desire to give to Levinas, but his gift can only be achieved by playing along its fault lines, because it *traverses* the *interface*

between gift and economy."<sup>136</sup> "Traversal" and "interface" are terms that better capture the contradictoriness of the gift and the inter-contamination of its aspects. "Traversal" and "interface" better capture that which is both possible and necessary: *partial* perception, description, identification.

The gift is *divided*—"division" in this context is stated with absolute affirmation. The gift is *at the same time* gratuitous (and therefore imperceptible) and identifiable (and therefore perceptible). And, in order to remain faithful to the paradoxical nature of the gift, phraseologies of traversal and degree seem to offer the opportunity to remain faithful to the paradoxical nature of the gift.

Now, Derrida's bias against exchange may be refigured as a kind of yearning for the pure gift—the unconditional gift that remains unmarked by the "stain" of presence, identification, and exchange. This yearning, which verges on a kind of desire for purity (which I questioned, but also identified with, in the previous subsection), is made manifest in the very text that Derrida cites in the above-mentioned passage—*The Gift of Death*. In that text, Derrida employs a lexicon of infection to critique the "contamination" of the gift by exchange: "The moment the gift, however generous it be, is *infected* with the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge or recognition, it falls within the ambit of an economy . . ."<sup>137</sup> According to Derrida, the gift becomes infected and fallen—and disappears. This emotive kind of lexicon blurs Derrida's original insight: that the gift is marked by the contradictory aspects of "purity" (freedom, linearity, etc.) and "impurity" (exchange, circularity, etc.).<sup>138</sup> Defining these aspects as "pure" (good) and "impure" (bad) risks privileging the former aspect.

<sup>136</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 207; emphases added. Derrida's essay appears in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 11-48. This essay, like many other Derridean texts, deals with the issue of gifting. Horner's reading of this text according to a theological problematic of the gift is excellent. *RGG*, 205-208.

<sup>137</sup> Derrida, *GD*, 112; emphasis added.

<sup>138</sup> Merold Westphal, for instance, acknowledges the original (initial) "Derridean claim that there is no *pure* gift, no gift completely eccentric to the economy of exchange." "Appropriating Postmodernism," in Westphal, *PPCT*, 1-10, 7.

According to a logic of oscillation, debt and, more broadly, exchange are *not* “foreign” to the gift, nor do they “contaminate” it from outside. Exchange is elemental to it: otherwise, the gift would not be recognized or received in our everydayness. Or, if one wants to employ the vocabulary of contamination to describe the gift, one would have to insist that gratuity and exchange inter-contaminate each other. As is discussed in more detail below, of course the aspect of exchange should not overwhelm the gift: otherwise, the gift cannot be differentiated from the bribe, the tithe, and so on. How is this overwhelming avoided? By emphasizing the gift’s gratuity, but not freezing in it—for this would merely reverse the *stasis* (fixing the gift according to one of its elements). After all, *stasis* is the opposite of oscillation. One respects the gift’s division or multiplicity by ceaselessly oscillating between its two basic aspects.

Derrida’s denial of any possible “theoretical or phenomenological identification” of the gift, and the espousal of an absolute nonrelation between the gift and the “horizon of economy, ontology, constative statements, and theoretical determination and judgment” is excessive. As Derrida’s own comments stipulate in *Given Time*, the gift “would no doubt be related to economy.”

In the above-quoted passage, Derrida does not merely privilege excess but he resolutely denies identification. There is no oscillation there. What does this mean in terms of an aporetic of the gift? Derrida’s aporetic is in this instance *not aporetic enough*. There is an excessive (severe) apohaticism at work there: an absolute insistence on our inability to identify the gift denies the possibility of perceiving creation as a gift. An excessive apohaticism converts or reverses total circumscription (arguably traditional epistemology’s ultimate ambition) to total non-circumscription (the claim that there is no access to any [small “k”] knowledge or [small “t”] truth). One needs to alternate between these two extremes—the gift requires it. To be sure, the thing itself slips away, but it slips away *from* one’s grasp. It slips away: the gift is partially grasped.

A second text takes Derrida’s excessiveness to the extreme. It occurs when Derrida outlines his version of Marion’s “deepest ambition” (discussed above).

Derrida claims:

Finally, we have the word gift in our culture. We received it; it functions in the Western lexicon, Western culture, in religion, in economics, and so on. I try to struggle with the aporias which are located in this heritage. . . . But at some point I am ready to give up the word. Since this word is finally contradictory, I am ready to give up this word at some point.<sup>139</sup>

This decisive passage bears repeating: Derrida acknowledges that our culture is gifted with the word “gift.” It functions in all manner of spheres: cultural, religious, economic. Derrida admirably wrestles with the aporias located in the heritage of the gift in our culture. Indeed, Derrida’s “struggle,” marked, no doubt, by a healthy dose of play and (irreverent) joy, inspired this very study. But it seems the gift-aporia has (almost) won the tussle: Derrida is ready to give up the fight by giving up the word “gift.” The revealer (and reveler?) *par excellence* of the contradictoriness of this aporia is ready to give it up after years of struggling with it.

Straightaway, a number of qualifiers are warranted before I proceed. First (and perhaps most obviously), one may account for this striking capitulation as an instance of Derridean dramatics.<sup>140</sup> French philosophers are known, after all, for their melodramatic styles.<sup>141</sup> Perhaps Derrida’s apparent desire to give up the word “gift” is a tactic to emphasize its paradoxicality: the gift is *so aporetic* Derrida is ready to give it up. Second, it should also be noted that Derrida is *at the brink* of giving up the gift: he is “ready to give up the word at some point,” but one remains unsure (undecided) whether he has reached it. Has Derrida reached this point?

<sup>139</sup> Derrida and Marion, *OG*, 67; emphasis added.

<sup>140</sup> One is unable to establish by the letter of the text whether these words are uttered with irony or playfulness. One can only go by the letter of the text.

<sup>141</sup> Merold Westphal expresses it poignantly: “French intellectuals seem to feel a deep need to shock and scandalize.” Westphal, “Positive Postmodernism as Radical Hermeneutics,” in *The Very Idea of Radical Hermeneutics*, ed. Roy Martinez (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1997), 48-63, 55.

One may argue that Derrida has allowed himself a small opening, in case he decides he is ready to resume the struggle with the gift-aporia. A small opening—in spite of the fact that he employs a vocabulary of finality, epitomized by the word “finally” (mentioned twice in this passage). Of course, what has become increasingly apparent in the course of this study is that there is no finality to the gift-aporia. Hence the need for oscillation: there is no finality to oscillation; oscillation is a constant (and consequently dizzying, maddening) movement.

Finally, Derrida’s desire to give up the word “gift” is perhaps borne of the frustration of having to hold the tension in the gift. We humans—especially we post-Enlightenment humans who perhaps retain a desire to understand everything—are exasperated by our inability to fully comprehend and contain the aporia of the gift. This exasperation is understandable, but one should not give in to it. The aporeticity of the gift must be saved, even at the cost of exasperation.

Taking into consideration the above qualifications, one nevertheless finds the above passage astounding. Why *astounding*? Derrida’s admission is astounding because the thinker of the gift-aporia *par excellence*, and the thinker who implicitly employs something of an oscillating or oscillational logic to respectfully reflect the gift’s contradictoriness in *Given Time*, has finally given up on the gift—or is at least ready to.

But what should one do? Should one continue to fight the good fight? Struggles are, after all, demanding: one grows weary wrestling. Nevertheless, we should never give up the gift. First and foremost, it should *not* be given up *precisely because* it is contradictory. Annoying as it may be, the word, concept, and phenomenon of gifting is an example *par excellence* of the paradoxical. It is a powerful reminder of unconditionality and excess, as well as our inability to “escape” from conditionality and exchange. It is precisely because the gift is marked by two remarkably contradictory moments or movements (“pure” freedom and “impure” identification) that the word “gift” should be saved. This word and phenomenon may remind us, if we think about it carefully and persistently enough, that there is an unresolvable tension between the one and the other. We think,

work, play in this tension. We therefore need to oscillate, as unflinchingly as we can, between the “pure” and “impure.”

### Paralyzed But Oscillating In The Aporia

At one point in “Apostles of the Impossible,” Caputo makes the following observation: “In ‘On the Gift,’ the focal issue between Marion and Derrida is once again the question of givenness and presence, and once again they share a mutual concern, *to save the gift in the face of the aporia* which they both agree is well formulated in *Given Time*.”<sup>142</sup> Now, “to save the gift in the face of an aporia” is precisely the issue at stake in this thesis. The phrase may be understood in two ways. The gift may be saved *from* the aporia: Marion saves the gift by taking it away from the horizon of exchange and relocating it in the safer horizon of givenness, though one still seems to be in debt or indebted. And, while Derrida attempts to think the gift as that which interrupts—or even *gifts*—circularity, the aporia nevertheless seems so overwhelming that he is “ready to give up the word [gift].” When Marion and Derrida face this aporia, they “save” the gift by removing it from either exchange or language.

*Alternatively*, the gift may be saved *by* the aporia, even though, and at the same time, the gift disappears *in* the aporia. Despite the temptations (which are somewhat overwhelming for Marion and Derrida—and perhaps for us all), there is no need for a face-off between the gift and the aporia. Gift and aporia: together. The aporia (freedom/exchange) is what makes the gift im/possible; and, even though we crave the pure, unconditional gift, we cannot deny commerce: how could we identify the gift—save economically? We would be unable to fathom the unfathomable world-gift if we refused to face head-on *both* aspects of the aporia. The gift is both knowable and enigmatic; it is both perceivable and elusive—in a word, *aporetic*.

<sup>142</sup> Caputo, *AI*, 200; emphasis added.

And so, there is no need to give up the word "gift" (Derrida), nor to remove it from exchange altogether (Marion); on the contrary, we should face it head-on in all its entangling aporeticity. If there is no way *out of* the gift-aporia, then an appropriate way *through it* is to oscillate *within it*. As chapters 2 and 3 of the present study reveal, the gift-aporia appears to be unresolvable, and so our thinking should resolutely oscillate between the gift's two basic aspects: freedom and identification.

A resolution in favor of oscillation fulfils the theoretical ambition of the present work: to think the gift as faithfully as possible, according to its aporetic framework. However, dwelling on the idea of the gift-aporia proves to be instructive *oikologically*: thinking through the gift-aporia discloses a way of thinking our interrelation with the creation-gift: if what-is is a gift, and if the gift is an aporia whose reception involves oscillation, then we should oscillationally interact with the creation-gift-aporia. But how do we—and how should we—oscillationally receive creation? I take up this question in the following chapter.

#### 4. THE OSCILLATIONAL *ÉTHOS* OF THIS APORETICS

##### Sketching An *Oiko/theo/logical Éthos*

The present meditation is committed to two basic endeavors. The first venture, following Derrida's aporetics of gifting as developed in *Given Time*, involved an extended meditation on the gift's aporeticity. I underlined the multivalent renderings of the "gift" in the Bible, and then pinpointed the moments when archival theology reflected on the gift's competing aspects of excess and exchange (§ 2.1). In the twentieth century, the gift-paradox was broached with more rigor and vigor. Theologically, the work of Schmitz, Webb, and Marion demonstrated this new or renewed interest, and I discussed the ways in which their thinking of the gift is caught up in the gift's aporeticity (§ 2.2). In the third chapter, Marion's philosophy of the gift was considered, and I indicated that even this radical rethinking seems to end up ensconced in the gift's aporeticity (§ 3.1). The suggestion was made that, if we continue to accept the conventional definition of gift (that which is freely given and identified as such), we cannot "solve" the gift-aporia by siding with either its gratuity or circularity, but that its aporeticity is best honored by maintaining the tension between its two basic elements. I described the maintenance of this tension in terms of *oscillation*: a ceaseless movement in diverging directions that respects and reflects the double movement in/of the gift. Paralyzed, we oscillate in the gift (§ 3.2).

A second undertaking remains, which could only be properly engaged after having traversed the first: to think the gift-aporia and its oscillation *as it concerns creation*. In the present chapter, I set forth some of the ways in which an oscillational thinking of gifting relates to how we may interact with the web of creation. The thesis therefore moves in an overtly eco-ethical direction: the remaining task involves a delineation of the ways in which an oscillational thinking of gifting may enter the service of *oikology*: of right relations with the creation-gift, which entails the restriction of—and (one hopes) *an end to*—its degradation.

But how is "the ethical" construed here? This chapter sketches elements of an *éthos*. The Greek word *éthos* originally means "an accustomed place" and therefore has a scope which extends beyond "character," "morality," or "custom" to acknowledge and embrace our inhabitation in creation.<sup>1</sup> The *éthos* of a radically egalitarian aporetics of gifting therefore deviates from fundamentally anthropocentric and system-building ethics, such as utilitarianism and deontology.<sup>2</sup> This broader, deeper term better reflects gifting's priority and transgression of any formulaic ethics. Webb, for instance, questions whether excess could possess an ethics: "does excess have an ethics?" and recognizes that "Excess, after all, is not easily moralized."<sup>3</sup>

In words echoing Heidegger's, and raising notions that recur in the present chapter, Foltz outlines some of the concerns of *éthos*:

It concerns the bearing through which we comport ourselves toward entities. . . . It concerns whether we conserve and look after entities—allowing them to be what they are . . .—or whether we seek revenge for their non-transparency to our gaze and their non-accessibility to our demands for total control. It concerns whether our bearing towards entities is the gentleness that gathers in the peace and stillness . . . or the evil and malice of the destructive and inflammatory . . .<sup>4</sup>

The *éthos* sketched here therefore has to do with our comportment towards creation. However, some of the other nuances of "the ethical" are also implied and refigured; for instance, the notion of *éthos* as custom is an important one: one of the

<sup>1</sup> The word "*éthos*" originally denotes "an accustomed place: hence in plur. seats, haunts, abodes, first, of beasts, but afterwards of men [sic]." Only later does it denote "custom, usage, habit." Liddell and Scott, *AL*, 303.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Foltz, *ITE*, 170f; also refer to Ruether, *GG*, 225.

<sup>3</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 84; *NSE*, 433. Of course, Webb nevertheless sketches a Christian ethics that attempts to reflect excess. Webb, *TGG*, 140. Webb also observes that excess cannot be easily politicized: "One possible limitation of these moments [of epiphany, excess] is their apolitical character." Webb, *NSE*, 436. Also refer to Marion, *BG*, 88.

<sup>4</sup> Foltz, *ITE*, 169; the cited passage forms part of Foltz's excellent exposition of Heidegger's retrieval of "*éthos*." *ITE*, 166-176.

hopes of this aporetics is that the perception of what-is as a gift (eventually) becomes customary or habitual, a habit that will contribute to a gentler inhabitation of the creation-gift. After all, this *éthos* contributes to the effort of erasing bad habits like instrumentalization, manipulation, and destruction.

I can only present a *sketch* of certain aspects of a gift-*éthos*, for an extensive delineation would require a prolonged meditation, and the question of right relations is obviously expansive and complex. However, there are also two basic advantages with the provision of an outline. First, an overview of some of the most crucial aspects of an aporetic *éthos* ensures that I do not focus on one aspect and thereby risk the neglect of another, which is precisely the imperative of oscillation. Second, the sketch itself reflects the oscillational logic at work (as will become evident). In the first section of the chapter, I discuss the ways in which the creation-gift's excess overwhelms us, focusing on the effects of silence (§ 4.2.1) and what I term "tremblings" (bewilderment, wonder, etc.) (§ 4.1.2). In the second section, some of the most significant reactions by the active agent are examined: letting-be (4.2.1), utility (§ 4.2.2), enjoyment (§ 4.2.3), and return (§ 4.2.3). My intention is to show how an oscillating *éthos*, marked by these indelibly interconnected receptions and interactions, forms an eco/theo/logically appropriate interface with the creation-gift: hence, each of the sections deals with philosophical, ecological, and ecotheological issues.

The kind of *éthos* enunciated here is certainly concomitant with the core values of environmental ethics (reverence, letting-be, resistance against instrumentalism and destruction, etc.). The present chapter attempts to contribute to the formation and sustenance of a radical *oikological* sensibility or consciousness.<sup>5</sup> However, what is different about the present contribution is that

<sup>5</sup> My immediate concern is to contribute to the transformation of people's perceptions of, and relations with, creation. Of course, what is also required is radical *cultural* transformation. However, like McFague in *The Body of God*, my present task is an attempt to "change sensibilities," and the study "does not pretend to solve the intricate, complex dilemmas and issues that we face in every dimension of our personal, communal, and political lives." McFague, *TBG*, 11, 202; also refer to McFague, *SNC*, 1-2, 4-7. On the question of socio-political transformation, refer to, e.g., Ruether, *GG*, ch. 10.

this *êthos* is engendered by a relentlessly aporetic-oscillational thinking of gift/ing. Thus, I do not move “from” an aporetics “to” an *êthos*, but rather explicitly extrapolate the *êthos* of this aporetics.

#### 4.1 AN OVERWHELMING EXCESS

Throughout the present work, I have referred to the notion that the gift precedes and exceeds the subject: this was highlighted in Derrida’s and Marion’s reflections on the gift (Introduction, § 3.1.1). Like Derrida and Marion, Schmitz also emphasizes the gift’s precedence, with specific reference to the creation-gift: “Creation is to be understood as the reception of a good not due in any way, so that there cannot be even a subject of that reception; there is not something which receives, but rather sheer receiving.”<sup>6</sup> Note the displacement of the subject in that passage. Schmitz recognizes the gift-event as something that surpasses the subject: there is “sheer receiving.”

However, the subject must also enter the scene of gifting in order for the gift to be identified as such: if the gift is not recognized as such by a knower, then how could it appear as a gift? The subject necessarily enters the thinking of gifting. Nonetheless, Schmitz is correct in identifying the prior-ity of gifting. Of course, little may be stated about the pre-conscious self: like Freud’s “subconscious,” it precedes and eludes the discursive subject. Nevertheless, there are a number of ways in which we may be reminded of the creation-gift’s excess, which, in turn, evoke certain feelings and actions by the reflective agent.

In what ways are we pre- or semi-consciously reminded of creation’s prior-ity and giftness? The gift overwhelms us in a number of ways and with a number of effects. Marion’s phenomenology offers a vivid portrayal of the given gift’s overcoming of the recipient, particularly since Marion intends “to describe how and how far, in the appearing, the initiative belongs in principle to the phenomenon,

<sup>6</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 33; emphases added.

not the gaze [of the human observer].”<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon’s “initiative” or freedom is cast in violent terms, signaling the extent of this excess: the given phenomenon “crashes,” “explodes” over consciousness, it “comes upon me,” it “bursts forth.”<sup>8</sup> Free of human beings’ metaphysical calculations, the independent phenomenon surges up and ascends in a “free and autonomous coming forward . . .”<sup>9</sup> Marion cites the computer as an example of the provocatively self-given phenomenon. Marion admits that, as an object, it is both “available” and “knowable.”<sup>10</sup> But even as a piece of equipment, it overwhelms and occupies the operator: the computer “tames my hand, exasperates my patience, and burdens my memory,” and “makes a request of me, mobilizes me, makes me contribute—comes upon me.”<sup>11</sup>

In light of these kinds of observations in which creation (and its individual phenomena) overwhelms the self and its subjectivity, it is vital that the gift’s excess be discussed in some detail, for, as I explain, this overwhelming may be ecologically insightful. In this section, I outline two important categories of phenomena that characterize the reception of, and response towards, the excess-ful creation-gift: the category of silence or *besychia* (§ 4.1.1); and, the group of phenomena like bewilderment and wonder (and even “terror”), collectively titled here as “tremblings” (§ 4.1.2). One may propose that these are “passive” receptions of the creation-gift rather than any fully-fledged “active” responses by self-mastered subjectivities: if creation gifts itself in excess (freedom, gratuity), it exceeds and precedes the knowing subject (as Marion, Derrida, Schmitz, and Webb argue): we receive our selves and each other prior to the formation of the subject. There is, therefore, a crucial difference (but also a degree of convergence) between (passive)

<sup>7</sup> Marion, *BG*, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Marion, *BG*, 151, 159; also refer to e.g. *BG*, 202, 283.

<sup>9</sup> Marion, *BG*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Marion, *BG*, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Marion, *BG*, 128. Marion therefore reverses an Eckhartian thinking of the gift’s reception: Eckhart states: “So it is with God’s gifts: they have to be measured according to him who is to receive them and not according to the one who gives them.” Eckhart, “Sermon Seven,” in Fox, *Br*, 116.

*reception* and (active) *response*: the phenomenon of what-is *precedes* the autonomous I. If the gift foreshadows and exceeds subjectivity, then we receive our selves before we are able to *respond* in any intentional or deliberate way; our passivity prefigures any conscious response to the gift.

But how and why should the question of the gift's *reception*—as opposed to the subject's *response*—form part of a thoughtful and practical *êthos*? The question of *reception* is broached because this *êthos* surpasses an ethics that focuses exclusively on the actions of the self-possessed subject. This chapter therefore begins with that which precedes human agency: in other words, it begins with *that which is done to us*. It is necessary to indicate ways in which freely given creation affects us—ways that are ecologically instructive and inspirational.

#### 4.1.1 Silences

The reception of the creation-gift precedes and exceeds discourse. That is why the complex question of *silence* is essential to an *oiko*-aporetics of gifting. What has “silence” to do with the reception of freely given creation? If/since the creation-gift prefigures discursive subjectivity, then, by definition, a prior or immemorial silence (for there are others) marks the reception of the overwhelming gift.<sup>12</sup> Webb incisively observes the way in which Derrida's work engages and reflects the question of silence. Webb explains: “His [Derrida's] discourse is underwritten by a strategic (and yet essential) hesitation or indecision that enables him to prolong what he does not want to say.”<sup>13</sup> Why does Derrida hesitate? Because he realizes that discourse amounts to exchange: by discussing the gift, one inscribes the gift in exchange.

The gift requires silence: “hyperbole [excess], for Derrida, cannot be related to the give-and-take of conversation, and thus it is impossible to attend to excess in

<sup>12</sup> Marion astutely notes the following: “We know silences of contempt and of joy, of pain and of pleasure, of consent and of solitude.” *GIW/B*, 53-54.

<sup>13</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 78-79.

a constructive manner. . . . Hyperbole is the silence within which the gift must be both given and received.”<sup>14</sup> But isn't silence itself a response—albeit a subtle, less intrusive reaction? Whether one responds with silence or gratitude, the gift is returned. The theorist of the gift, together with every gift-recipient, faces a double bind: to theorize/return the gift undoes the gift by undoing its gratuity. To remain silent is itself a response that erases the gift's linearity. Return seems inevitable when the silence is the silence of the discursive agent.

Nevertheless, silence is an *exemplary* response by the active subject for the following reasons. First, it is as close to “non-response” as exchange and subjectivity permit: it is a kind of “response-without-response.” Even though conscious, discursive silence is a reaction, it is nevertheless an exceptional attempt to reflect the overflowing gift. It reflects the excess that precedes and exceeds discourse. Silence excels in its resistance to any exaggerated kinds of circularity (such as gratitude, indebtedness, or even hostility). In other words, a certain silence by the active agent (as impossible as it appears to be) reflects and respects the gift's freedom.

This silence is crucial on eco-critical and eco-ethical grounds. The following statement by Webb deserves lengthy citation in terms of the theoretical and ethical repercussions of silence:

Derrida's comments about silence are suggestive. Think of the ways in which some religious traditions, like Quakers or Trappists, use silence in excessive ways in order to interrupt the demands for explanation and reciprocation. To enter into silence is to leave behind the give and take of conversation and to join a communal space where what is given is received without the need for counting and balancing. Put simply, silence suggests that all questions do not need to be answered. . . . To pause in silence before the gift is not to ignore it but to give it the only response that can be given in kind.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 171, n. 5.

Apart from the fact that Webb ends this inspiring passage by figuring silence in the language of exchange economy (silence responds “in kind”), it is constituted by a number of insightful remarks. First, silence disrupts the knowing subject’s all-consuming desire “for explanation and reciprocation,” “for counting and balancing,” for answering every question. One could propose that, in a certain way, this silence is the *other* of knowledge: to remain silent (to state nothing) is to acknowledge excess and unknowing. The call to silence is not new. As Marion points out in *God Without Being*, the respect paid to this kind of silence has a long and distinguished history—Aristotle, Origen (185-232), (Pseudo-)Dionysius (sixth century), Wittgenstein, Heidegger, etc.—even though the “object” of this silence has usually been God.<sup>16</sup> My contention is that the excess that marks the creation-gift requires the same kind of silence.

Second, note Webb’s reference to Quakers and Trappists. As with the western philosophical and theological history of this “wise silence” (Dionysius’ phrase), the spiritual practice of *hesychia* (silence, stillness) also has a long history in the West.<sup>17</sup> Very early on in Christianity, this practice developed in a variety of religious movements and orders, and persists today in institutional and more informal forms. While the practice of *hesychia* may be marked by mystical intentions (contemplation, illumination, *theosis*), this silence counteracts any religious tendency towards exchange and indebtedness. Furthermore, one may identify a relation between silence and *oikology*: it is little wonder, for example, that the Trappist writer and activist, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), who taught and practiced *hesychia*, was also a deeply ecological thinker.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore (as I note below), there is an obvious link between silence and letting-be: by definition, one can only let things be by being silent and still.

<sup>16</sup> Refer to Marion, *GWB*, 53-60.

<sup>17</sup> No doubt, *hesychia* finds its expression in other-than-Christian spiritualities. Refer to, e.g., *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Refer to the following texts: *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2002); *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature by Thomas Merton*, ed. Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame, IN.: Sorin Books, 2003).

The practice of *hesychia*, whether in institutionalized or other forms, also forms or informs an eco-*êthos*: silence makes room for *auto/poïesis* and therefore allows *pragmata* to be gifts. This kind of silence does not destroy. By reminding ourselves of the creation-gift’s excess, the subject may practice a silence that protects and promotes what-is. The need for *hesychia* is crucial (and obvious): creation is inundated by the damaging “noise” of excessive *epistêmê* and *technê*.

Silence, it seems, would be the proper language of gifting. But it is important to remember that the gift also requires its recognition: therefore discourse is also proper to the gift. Webb rightly oscillates between silence and discourse: “To account for the gift, to theorize its destination, is to reject the gift altogether, yet the gift demands some sort of response.”<sup>19</sup> And so, Webb concludes: “Language is the gift that makes the discourse on giving both possible and impossible.”<sup>20</sup> We should oscillate between silence and discourse.

#### 4.1.2 Tremblings

Silence is not the only indicator of the creation-gift’s precedence. Our bodies also inform us of this gift’s excess when they/we tremble. Now, as the *OED* defines it, “to tremble” is “To shake involuntarily as with fear or other emotion . . . to quake, quiver, shiver” or “To be affected with dread or apprehension, or with any feeling that is accompanied by trembling.”<sup>21</sup> To be sure, “trembling” is usually associated with negative states (such as fear and medical conditions such as “trembling palsy” or Parkinson’s disease).<sup>22</sup> However, it should be emphasized that “trembling” is not restricted to negative contexts: the *OED* stipulates that trembling may also be triggered by more positive situations: as one of the cited

<sup>19</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 79. Elsewhere, Webb contends: “yet the discourse on giving persists.” *TGG*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> The following definition is also provided: “To be agitated or affected with vibratory motion . . .”

<sup>22</sup> The *OED* definition states the following physiological conditions associated with trembling: “paralysis characterized by trembling of the extremities or the head” or the more general term “the trembles . . . Any disease or condition characterized by an involuntary shaking, as ague or palsy.”

definitions testify, trembling may be accompanied by feelings other than dread or apprehension ("with *any feeling* that is accompanied by trembling; emphasis added). The *OED* also specifies that one can tremble "esp. with agitation or *excitement*" (emphasis added): "excitement" usually represents a positive state. After all, trembling may be associated with some of the most singularly enjoyable experiences—such as orgasm. In sum, there may be both positive and negative tremblings.

In what ways does trembling mark the reception of the creation-gift? In this section, I discuss a number of responses that fall under the general category of "tremblings." Some of these responses are less voluntary than others, but they all share the characteristic of a kind of passivity, as opposed to active returns by a self-composed subject (utility, indebtedness, etc.). These states include the broad and inter-connected categories of bewilderment, wonder, and humility. These experiences traverse the border between pre-subjectivity and intentional reaction and interaction: they precede but also begin to enter discourse. They are, after all, concepts and experiences that traverse but also exceed exchange.

A first set of reactions to the freely given creation-web may be described as "bewilderment" and even "terror"—terms employed and discussed by Webb in *The Gifting God*. As with the question of silence, Webb's text proves illuminating (via a critique of his work). As part of his criticism of excessive squandering, Webb announces:

taken to an extreme, that which is sheerly given, that which is there for absolutely no apparent justification, would be not only extravagant [defined by Webb as: "straying, roaming, erring," *TGG*, 48] but also superfluous ["disorienting as well as renewing," *TGG*, 48]. . . . The appropriate response to such spurious thereness is not gratitude but

bewilderment and perhaps even terror. How does the gratuitous lead to gratitude and not simply to surprise and perplexity?<sup>23</sup>

This passage resounds with oscillation: Web oscillates between perplexity (reflecting the gift's freedom), on the one hand, and gratitude (reflecting identification), on the other. Webb acknowledges that the gift dis/orients; it leads to gratitude as well as surprise. The phrase "and not simply" certainly belongs to the logic and lexicon of oscillation. Surprise and perplexity correspond to the linearity of the gift; gratitude corresponds to the circularity of the gift.<sup>24</sup> *However*, Webb seems wary of—perhaps even terrified by—the possibility of "the sheerly given" arising with "absolutely no apparent justification." This thought and event strikes terror in the minds of those who seek answers to every question and a cause for every phenomenon. Disorientation terrifies those who seek absolute direction, certainty, and control. The "rose-without-why" continues to bewilder and even terrify the quest for omniscience, even for a theologian (Webb) who readily accepts divine excess and human finitude.

Excess, which, by definition, exceeds familiarity, sameness, and identification, prompts a certain terror. Like God, death, or desire, freely given creation is itself a *mysterium tremendum*, and generates a kind of "terror" or awe. But why should reactions like bewilderment and even terror resound *ecologically*? The features of extravagance and superfluity (roaming, erring, disorienting) mark an alternative path from the route of economics (domesticating, correcting, orienting). We *should* be perplexed and even a little "*terrified*." Too much familiarization and domestication provides the impetus for subjugation and destruction (indicated by the aphorism "familiarity breeds contempt").

<sup>23</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 49. On the question of the extravagant, Webb explains: "*extravagant* originally meant that which wanders out of bounds, straying, roaming, erring. It is prodigal, indeterminate, and rootless because (like the son in the famous parable) it is not bound by the transactional structure of giving, receiving, and returning." *TGG*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> In the above-mentioned quotation, Webb also mentions the reaction of surprise—a more moderate response compared to "terror" and perplexity. On the question of surprise, refer to, e.g., Derrida, *GT*, 146-148; Marion, *BG*, 200; Webb, *TGC*, 57; Schmitz, *TGC*, 44.

Of course, there is an obvious risk in implicating "terror" (and trembling) in the present context (hence, the quotation marks): a term like "terror" may be mistaken for the *fear*—especially the fear of the Other (human and otherwise), a fear which is then usually (and tragically) overcome by overcoming (controlling, disfiguring, annihilating) the Other. But the "terror" referred to here differs from a fear that leads to the violation of creation-gifts on account of their excess (difference, otherness, mystery, sovereignty).

Any risk of misinterpreting this ecological "terror" for a violence-inducing fear is minimized by remembering that this "terror" occurs in the context of oscillation: oscillation between the nomadic and the domestic, between the terr(or)ific and the familiar is required in order to reflect the freedom and identification of the creation-gift. With respect to this aporia, one should, in Webb's words, tread the paths of "bewilderment and perhaps even terror," *as well as* the path of familiarity.

And so, the giftness, and therefore the excess, of creation can—and should—evoke a certain fear and trembling: an awareness of the giftness and otherness of the other paralyzes—or *should* paralyze—the otherwise mastering-subject. Joseph Sittler ponders the "terrifying dynamism of the natural world."<sup>25</sup> When one trembles, one does not inflict harm on the creation-gift. As strange as it seems, this kind of "terror" participates in an ecological letting-be.

However, oscillation should be maintained: the fear that reflects excess should be juxtaposed with a familiarity that reflects exchange. The chance of an excessive terror arising from a fear aroused by unknowing is counteracted by an exchange that generates familiarity and familial interaction. In turn, this familiarization and interaction is juxtaposed with bewilderment: oscillation should be incessant, so as to reflect both aspects of the gift. If what-is is a gift, and if the

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Sittler, "The Sittler Speeches," in *Center for the Study of Campus Ministry Yearbook 1977-78*, ed. Phil Schroeder (Valparaiso, IN.: Valparaiso University Press, 1978), 8-61, 32 [hereafter Sittler, *TSS*].

gift is an aporia, then creation's aporeticity is reflected in the recipient's bewilderment *and* familiarity with the gift.

While bewilderment and "terror" are the most intense eco-affirmative conditions marking the reception of the creation-gift, more "moderate" and "reflective" responses include the broad and correlated states of surprise, wonder, and mystery. One must emphasize that the category of mystery does not merely pertain to that which is "not yet known", but that mystery is constitutive of the *pragma*-gift.<sup>26</sup> Etymologically, "mystery" is related to *besychia*, for the former term signals the latter: "*mystos*" means keeping silent (*myster*: mute).<sup>27</sup> Derrida, who is decidedly and openly perplexed by the gift-aporia, is fascinated by the mysteriousness and graciousness of the gift.<sup>28</sup> Schmitz denotes the mysteriousness of the creation-event.<sup>29</sup>

Why are responses inspired by a recognition of the mystery of the creation-gift eco-theoretically and eco-ethically significant? First, the arousal of mystery reflects the gift's excess. The gift-aporia perplexes: it evokes a sense of wonder and mystery. How is an acknowledgment of mystery ecologically valuable? When a thing is a mystery (and acknowledged as such), any attempt to totalize it is resisted. Like the concepts and experiences of silence and perplexity, mystery is otherwise than knowledge. Perhaps more specifically (if one may be "specific" about mystery), mystery is prior to knowledge; mystery is a condition of im/possibility for knowledge (be it epistemic, technological, or theological).

A text written by John of Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) is one of the rare instances in archival theology where an explicit connection is made between the creation-gift and a sense of wonder: "When a man [sic] thus considers the wonderful wealth and

<sup>26</sup> Foltz, *ITE*, 127.

<sup>27</sup> Refer to Scott, *LT*, 11. The term "mystery" is also linked to "muein" and "muo" which, according to the *OED*, means "to close the lips or eyes," or, according to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, means "to shut the mouth"; cited from the *Crosswalk* website, Washington <<http://bible1.crosswalk.com/Lexicons/NewTestamentGreek/grk.cgi?number=3466>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 42, 122-123, 146.

<sup>29</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 129, 130.

loftiness of the Divine Nature, and all the multiplicity of gifts which He gives and offers to His creatures, then there grows up within him a wonder at such manifold richness, at such loftiness, and at the immeasurable faithfulness of God to His creatures."<sup>30</sup> The act of contemplating the fecundity of the creation-web produces a sense of wonder.<sup>31</sup>

Late-modern ecotheological reflections emphasize reactions and attitudes like trembling and wonder respectively. Recalling Augustine, Keller notes that "each finite body . . . surrounded and permeated by [divine] infinity" is "shaken and confused . . ."<sup>32</sup> Excess figured in terms of infinity overwhelms finite creation. McFague notes that a striking feature about process theology is its emphasis on reactions like awe and wonder towards creation.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, McFague stresses the centrality of a sense of mystery for an *oikological* sensibility: "A first step, then, towards a healthy ecological sensibility may well be a return, via a second naivete, to the wonder we as children had for the world . . ."<sup>34</sup> The construal of the matrix of beings as a gift attempts to encourage this second, *oikological* naivete.

But our astonishment is threatened and erased by other attitudes; Mark I. Wallace summarizes the commodification of what-is and its effect on a sense of wonder:

In our time nature has been commodified and domesticated into a piece of real estate; it has become one more consumer item to be bought and sold in order to maximize profits. Once a source of terror and awe, nature no longer functions as wild and sacred space for the eruption of the sublime . . . . We have exchanged the power and mystery of the

<sup>30</sup> John of Ruysbroeck, *Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, Bk. II, ch. 37. on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/r/ruysbroeck/adornment/htm/iv.ii.xxxvii.htm>> 18 August 2003.

<sup>31</sup> I stress that mystery is not the domain of the sacred. Scott powerfully figures the relation between astonishment and "facts" in the first chapter of *The Lives of Things*.

<sup>32</sup> Keller, *FD*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> McFague, *TBG*, 70-72.

<sup>34</sup> McFague, *TBG*, 123.

earth for the invisible hand of the marketplace and we are all the poorer for it.<sup>35</sup>

The notion and experience of mystery and wonder is crucial in terms of interpreting the world in a radically *oikological* way. We subjects are sometimes overwhelmed by a sense or feeling of awe: we pause; perhaps we try to think or express this state, though we may often be "lost for words." Mystery is obviously connected to some of the above-mentioned states: silence, "terror," perplexity, and so on. By perceiving creation as a gift, the fundamentally eco-affirmative states of terror, perplexity, and sublimity are evoked. Hence, the more often the sense of mystery and these other states are evoked, the more we promote pro-ecological thinking and practice, and the more we resist anti-ecological states such as excessive circumscription, instrumentalism, technologism, and commodification.

Apart from the mystery that overwhelms the self, how can the subject evoke mystery? In other words, how can the element of mystery belong to the subject's hermeneutical framework? Thinking creation as a gift contributes to such a hermeneutics: since the freely given matrix of beings is marked by mystery-provoking excess, then one's perception of what-is is colored by a sense of mystery. In other words, while the creation-gift usually overwhelms the subject, the subject can also maintain a sense of mystery, a sense of re-enchantment.<sup>36</sup> To neologize, one may name this process as "mysterization" (or even "re-mysterization"). It is akin to the process of "mystification"—though the latter term can denote "[t]he action of mystifying a person, playing upon his [sic] credulity, or throwing dust in his eyes." Certainly, the present aporetics does not seek to obscure the question of gifting (and how this aporia translates ecologically): on the contrary, I attempt to bring this aporia into starker relief. A second definition of "mystification,"

<sup>35</sup> Mark I. Wallace, "The Wounded Spirit as the Basis for Hope in an Age of Radical Ecology," in Hessel and Ruether, *CE*, 51-72, 52.

<sup>36</sup> On the notion of re-enchantment, refer to, e.g., David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001); Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981).

however, reflects the act of re-/mysterization: "to bewilder or perplex intentionally."<sup>37</sup> This is *precisely* one of the two basic intentions of the constructive aspect of this thesis. An aporia, by definition, perplexes; the gift-aporia *should* bewilder us, because bewilderment produces pro-ecological *skepsis* and *praxis*.

Why are the terms "mysterization" and "mystification" (in the second sense) prefaced with a "re-"? This preface almost seems redundant, for something like the creation-gift is *always already* mysterious. However, as I have noted above, creation's always-already-t/hereness provokes a kind of world-weariness in the subject: hence, the need for re-mysterization. An awareness of the mystery of the world should become *stark and habitual* for those of us—most/all of us—who are bored, rationalizing, instrumentalizing, and controlling.

Another kind of response marked by a certain "trembling"—albeit less volatile—is *humility*: a recognition and embrace of the gift's priority and excess. Webb conveys its significance: "The ethics of reception is marked by humility."<sup>38</sup> The human subject may realize that it *derives* from the creation-gift and this realization counterbalances the subject's pretensions of priority and mastery over itself and each other. An awareness of our derivation counteracts the active agent's desire for conceptual and technological imperialization. Schmitz recalls the thought of Gabriel Marcel, who expresses the relation between the gift, humility, and subjectivity succinctly: "We realize at once with what care the affirmation 'I am' must be approached. . . it [should] be whispered humbly, with . . . wonder. I say *with humility* because, after all, . . . this being is something that can only be granted

<sup>37</sup> The *OED* positively defines "mystify": "to wrap up or involve in mystery" or "bewilder or perplex intentionally" rather than the more negative meanings "to play on the credulity of," "to hoax," or "to obscure."

<sup>38</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 130.

to us as a gift; it is a crude illusion to believe that it is something which I can give to myself . . ."<sup>39</sup>

Humility corresponds to the above-mentioned receptions and responses to freely given creation. First, the self is gift-ed before the subject, and this priority humbles—but shouldn't humiliate—the subject. Second, humility is characterized by silence: one can only begin to listen to the other when one remains silent. To humble oneself is to put the other first. Humility's involvement with *hesychia*, in turn, generates a relation with relation: humility is a pre-condition for discourse. Indeed, humility becomes crucial in the context of an anthropocentrism that refuses to acknowledge, in a radically egalitarian way, the giftness of other creation-gifts. Hence, humility essentially marks the reception of, and response to, the creation-gift.<sup>40</sup>

Trembling, expressed as a certain "terror," bewilderment, wonder, mystery, and humility, is certainly ecological: when one trembles, one cannot ruin the Earth. But there are also responses to the creation-gift that are (more) thoroughly determined by subjectivity, and it is important to highlight and figure these reactions eco/theo/logically.

#### 4.2 EXEMPLARY AND EXCESSIVE EXCHANGES

A meditation on the overwhelmingness of the matrix of beings certainly inspires a radically *oikological êthos*, especially in terms of *hesychia* and the various "tremblings." However, as I have stressed throughout this thesis, the gift is marked

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 2, *Faith and Reality* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), 31. In the same passage, Marcel identifies a proper relation between humility and subjectivity: "We realize at once with what care the affirmation 'I am' must be approached: . . . it should not be put forward in any defiant or presumptuous tone . . ."; cited in Schmitz, *TGG*, 137, n. 63.

<sup>40</sup> For other texts that refer to the significance of humility and its relation to an ecological consciousness, refer to, e.g. Steven Bouma-Prediger, "Response to Louke van Wensveen: A Constructive Proposal," in Hessel and Ruether, *CE*, 173-182, 175, 179-180; and, Ian G. Barbour, "Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Sustainability," in Hessel and Ruether, *CE*, 385-401, 397-398.

by excess *and its other* (presence, identification, exchange): hence, this particular gift-aporetics does not shun but confirms the place of subjectivity, intentionality, and exchange in gifting. Of course, this confirmation is nuanced, otherwise the gift risks being reduced to mere exchange. What would comprise an *êthos* that respects and reflects an oscillational aporetics of gifting? In this section, I highlight four of the most exemplary responses to the gift, exemplary because they reflect the creation-gift's aporeticity: letting-be (§ 4.2.1), utility (§ 4.2.2), enjoyment (§ 4.2.3), and return (§ 4.2.4). Within each subsection, I sketch the nature of these responses according to theoretical, ecological, and eco/theological perspectives.

#### 4.2.1 Letting-Be, And Violences

In the above discourse on excess and some of the ways it overcomes us, the notion of letting-be already arises as a crucial "non/response": after all, when one is silent or trembling, one lets things be. It is now imperative to further address the question of the ways in which the phenomenon of letting-be marks the reception of, and interaction with, the creation-gift.

According to Matthew Fox, Meister Eckhart is the first to devise the term *Gelassenheit*, meaning letting-be.<sup>41</sup> *Gelassenheit* comes from the word *lassen*, "to let go, to relinquish or abandon," as Fox explains. He cites Caputo here: *Gelassenheit* "suggests openness and receptivity."<sup>42</sup> What is most remarkable about Fox's account of Eckhartian *Gelassenheit* is that he associates it with three phenomena whose significance is also deemed crucial via the present route: humility, *hesychia*,

<sup>41</sup> Fox, *Br*, 221. Since Heidegger's thinking is influenced by Eckhart, *Gelassenheit* is also an important concept in the former's work; refer to, e.g., "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking," in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 58-90; "On the Essence of Truth," trans. John Sallis, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 115-138; also refer to Foltz, *JTE*, 9, 162f; Derzida, *JLN*, 73-75.

<sup>42</sup> John D. Caputo, *MEH*, 119; cited in Fox, *Br*, 223. Refer to the sections devoted to *Gelassenheit* in *MEH*, 118-127, 173-183. Schmitz, Marion, and Webb also allude to letting-be; refer to Schmitz, *TGC*, 48; Marion, *BG*, 282, *ID*, 235; Webb *NSE*, 443, *TGG*, 6.

and play (play is discussed below). The significance of the first two has already been sketched above, but it is worth registering some features of Fox's commentary. On humility, Fox cites Eckhart, who connects letting-be with "gentleness," which connotes non-violence (violence is discussed below), and "selflessness," a resistance towards overbearing subjectivity: "What is being spoken of here is to meet with gentleness, in true humility and selflessness, everything which comes your way."<sup>43</sup>

Fox's Eckhart also recalls a silence within which our letting-be receives creation. Fox emphasizes that this silence is not "an abstract or a distant silence, however, but one that accompanies all of our activities. This attitude of utter reverence and gentle receptivity we are to bring to all we do . . ."<sup>44</sup> In a world where busy-ness and diversion are rife, the bringing-of-*hesychia* to all that we habitually busy subjects do is, of course, a challenging task—but its difficulty does not annul its urgency.

The reference to the phrase "gentle receptivity" joins the early reference to "gentleness" mentioned in the text on *ethôs* by Foltz cited at the beginning of this chapter. How does gentleness mark this *ethôs*? As I explain below, gentleness is related to letting-be in its contrast to violence: but how is violence figured in the context of the present study? I begin with a rudimentary description of "violence" formulated according to the definition of "gifting" employed in the present work: violence may be defined as that which disfigures and/or destroys the gratuitously given thing identified as such. Disfigurement and destruction may be figured according to the way they affect the two aspects of gifting: its gratuity and its perception.

Straightaway, it is crucial to distinguish a *variety of violences*. The first category, which includes what may be tentatively termed "necessary" violences, is to be distinguished from "unnecessary" disfigurement and destruction. To begin with, a

<sup>43</sup> Eckhart, *Die deutschen Werke*, ed. and trans. Josef Quint, Vol. 3, *Predigten 60-86* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1976), 514; cited in Fox, *Br*, 224.

<sup>44</sup> Fox, *Br*, 225-225.

first “necessary” violence is the “violence” of identification: as Derrida correctly ascertains, the identification of the gift inevitably leads to its undoing—this is the crux of the gift-aporia. Hence, one may maintain that identification (perception, knowledge, return, etc.) is itself “violent.” But this kind of violence un/does the gift in a paradoxical interplay: the gift requires identification as much as it requires its other (freedom, gratuity, excess, etc.). This “violence” is marked by a double movement: it makes and unmakes the gift. It is therefore *necessary*: the gift could not be perceived as such without the “violence” of perception.

Furthermore, the element of identification is not only “necessary” but also seems to be *positively good*. The ethical dimension to exchange may be expressed by introducing an important objection: if a gift is given gratuitously (in other words, if the gift comes without condition), then the recipient would be free to treat it in whatever manner the recipient desires: if there are no strings attached, the gift could be maliciously disfigured or destroyed. But this state of affairs would only be valid *if and only if* the gift were *solely* unconditional—the “pure” gift. However, as I have repeated throughout the thesis, what makes a gift an aporia is its two differing aspects: the gift is *both* unconditional (free, gratuitous) *and* conditional (identifiable, circular). By disfiguring or destroying the gift, the gift can no longer be identified or returned, which is one of its two essential elements.

Surprisingly (for those of us who overemphasize excess at the expense of exchange), the gift’s circularity turns out to safeguard it (at least theoretically, aporetically). To deny circularity is to deny the “inescapable” interindividedness of the creation-web. Of course, paying attention to the dimension of circularity does not imply that receptivity should rest there: identification’s indispensability appears in the context of the gift’s aporeticity and our corresponding oscillational interactivity. The gift exceeds its identification.

There is also a second “necessary” violence: as physical beings-in-relation, human beings, like other physical beings-in-relation, will *constantly and necessarily* violate the autonomy of other individuals—and *vice versa*—due to our interconnected materiality. When I walk, for instance, I inadvertently annihilate and

injure countless creatures (a/biotic and otherwise); likewise, an erupting volcano, for example, will unleash its “violence” upon itself and upon its neighbors (including humans). Included in this category of necessary violence is predation in all its various forms. McDaniel recognizes that “life inevitably involves the taking of other life. Every time we wash our faces we kill billions of bacteria; every time we eat, we support the death of plants, and often, animals.”<sup>45</sup> This kind of violence, while often unfortunate, is certainly not unethical: it is an essential characteristic of the corporeal matrix-gift. A certain inevitable violence issues from interrelatedness.

So, what are the violences that should be criticized and resisted? First, I turn to “disfigurative” violence: disfigurement occurs according to a number of interrelated phenomena like instrumentalism, commodification, and consumption. I briefly note some violent aspects to these phenomena in which we—especially we westerners—are all implicated.<sup>46</sup>

We humans intervene to manufacture things. Via our intervening manipulation, *phusis* is not allowed to come-forth in its freedom. The gift is not allowed to arise *auto/poietically* and gift itself in its autonomy. Both Marion and Heidegger prove illuminating in terms of our intervention and re-constitution of creation. Heidegger understands *phusis* and *technê* as two kinds of *poiêsis* (*hervorbringen*), as in the blossoming of a rose, or the casting of iron, respectively.<sup>47</sup> But modern technology violently deviates from or perverts *technê* in that the disclosure of entities is, in this case, *forced* (*herausfordern*): “modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such.”<sup>48</sup> Heidegger names this disfiguration *Bestand* or standing-reserve. He supplies the famous example of the power plant on

<sup>45</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 66; also refer to *ESGM*, 126-127; Wallace, *FS*, 165.

<sup>46</sup> Max Oelschlaeger acknowledges that all of us, environmentalists and corporate executives, are immersed in, and promote this violence: “Chrysler and General Motors and you and I are caught up together in modern society, acting out our roles in a cultural script we did not write.” Oelschlaeger, *CC*, 3. Of course, it is up to us to attempt to re-write the script.

<sup>47</sup> Refer to Heidegger, *QCT*, 10f.

<sup>48</sup> Heidegger, *QCT*, 14. In Keller’s words, things are “reduced . . . to raw stuff to use.” Keller, *FD*, 222.

the Rhine, which is set upon (*stellen*) to produce power for humans.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the “old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years” (itself a work of *technê*), the river is reduced to a source and resource of power driving the power station, which, in turn, redirects this power as a commodity to be consumed.

Heidegger describes the thoroughly secured and regulated process of violation: “the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew.”<sup>50</sup> And so, modern technology is a form of *technê* that not only does not let things be in their own particularity, but disfigures phenomena as standing-reserve, and as products for human consumption.

Marion’s phenomenology of givenness also offers a critique of science and technology, particularly in terms of the way in which human conceptualization precedes the phenomenon. Marion describes how “objectification” (where human conceptualization determines the given, rather than vice versa) is exemplified in “technological objects” or “products”: the intention and the concept hold sway over the thing itself, by planning, scheming, or drawing the object prior to its givenness.<sup>51</sup> Marion explains: “The concept (in the sense of the ‘concept’ of a product) renders this product visible before production actually gives it. . . . To show in and through a concept (signification, intention, etc.) precedes, determines, and sometimes annuls intuitive givenness.”<sup>52</sup> This kind of conceptualization foreshadows givenness and the latter only completes the former. (This precedence is analogous to the metaphysical notion that existence merely completes essence.) Marion puts it incisively: the “alienated” technological product is *induced* rather

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger, *QCT*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Heidegger, *QCT*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Marion, *BG*, 223.

<sup>52</sup> Marion, *BG*, 223-224.

than *produced*. “Thus foreseen, production and intuition (therefore givenness) remain beneath the watchful gaze of the concept.”<sup>53</sup>

Marion’s (unfortunately short) critique is powerful: technological objectification opposes the free, spontaneous upsurge of the phenomenon. This cannot be doubted. However, from the perspective of an aporetics of gifting, perhaps the issue of degree should be evoked once again: does this objectification *absolutely obliterate* the giftness of the phenomenon, or is it possible that it is still retained to some degree? In other words, even though the concept of a thing precedes its phenomenalization, does this entail that the *pragma* bears *no* mark of unknowability or mystery? Does mass-production prevent the possibility that its products and reproductions bear no trace of excess? I have wagered from the beginning that every thing bears such a mark—no matter whether it is a raging river or a mass-produced plastic bag. The co-created product-thing nevertheless retains a freedom or excess that carries over—at least in terms of the *phusis* from which the product is manufactured (as Mathews observes).<sup>54</sup>

I therefore disagree with Foltz when he remarks that “A Styrofoam container, for example, is *by no means* a ‘thing.’”<sup>55</sup> “By no means”? One would have to examine our respective definitions of “thing,” but I propose that a Styrofoam container is a thing, a gift—as well as a *Gift* (poison). I acknowledge, however, that, together with Heidegger’s example of an airliner, the Styrofoam container, is only (or usually) perceived as standing-reserve: the one, as a utensil; the other, as a form of transportation.<sup>56</sup> The possibility of their being figured as gifts—let alone “things”—remains submerged as we go on our disastrous way of perceiving phenomena primarily in their instrumentality and disposability.

<sup>53</sup> Marion, *BG*, 224.

<sup>54</sup> In my Introduction (“Creation”), I referred to Mathews’ insight that humanly constructed artifacts retain a degree of otherness that escapes us, for these artifacts are composed of “materials that are, after all, deeply other-than-us . . .” Refer to Mathews, *ST*, 56.

<sup>55</sup> Foltz, *ITE*, 20, n. 40; emphasis added.

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger, *QCT*, 17.

While disfigurement drastically changes creation-gifts, it does not annihilate them: we commit the most extreme violence towards the co-produced thing-in-relation if/when we destroy it. The gift is no longer. This extreme violence does not reduce the gift to a utility, nor does it disfigure the way it arises, but *erases* it. This kind of violence erases the possibility of identification and un/doing *altogether*, by erasing the phenomenon's be/com/ing or *auto/poiesis*. This extreme violence robs the gift of its appearance, identification, and reception. Deprivation (of the gift's presence and identification) and depravity ("destruction") are indelibly interrelated. This disfiguring and destructive violence is imposed by dominant human beings, often implicating induced things we/they co-create (like bombs, bulldozers, and plastic bags), to radically alter, subjugate, and annihilate the many gifts of creation: humans, other-than-human *pbuisis*, and constructed *pragmata*.

To be sure, the question and phenomenon of violence (in all its forms) is complicated by the issue of self-consciousness. Each violence mentioned here seems to have the following relation to un/intentionality. The "necessary" violence of identification is enacted by the knowing subject, while the violence intertwined with our interconnectedness can exceed consciousness. But the question of self-consciousness is more complicated with regard to disfigurative and destructive violence. These violences may often be enacted unintentionally, especially acts like instrumentalism and inducement. Drawing on a refigured Augustinianism, Keller rightly points out, when referring to sin or "discreation" (Keller's neologism), that we often discreate preconsciously, usually as a consequence of pre-existing repressive structures and relations (institutions, customs, mindsets, etc.).<sup>57</sup> Violence, whether enacted individually or corporately, occurs below or beyond self-reflexive subjectivity. And so, it is important to remember that excessive violence eludes us, insofar as it exceeds self-consciousness.

<sup>57</sup> Keller, *FD*, 80. "Discreation" is an eminently suitable term here: formally, because it encloses the word "creation"; substantially, because Keller's definition of "discreation" ("*creaturely relations that deny and exploit their own interrelations?*") approximates the "excessive/unnecessary violence" discussed here.

However, what matters for Keller is how these pre-existing conditions are negotiated *now*. "I become guilty if I do not take responsibility for the effects of past relations upon me now, as I affect the future." "Responsibility" is here figured in terms of choice; according to Keller, the governing criterion lies in the ability to choose, which ties in with the notion of *unnecessary* violence: "Sin is a matter not just of bad choices but of the *capacity* to choose."<sup>58</sup> But responsibility and choice are intentional acts: which return us (somewhat aporetically, and a little bit like the gift?) to the question of intentionality. Intentionality is therefore determinative (though probably not exclusively so) in relation to the question of excessive violence or discreation: as soon as we recognize instances of our disfigurative and destructive violences, then we become responsible for their relinquishment.

I am now better placed to return to the question that generated the present discussion: contrasting the violence that warrants resistance (disturbing and destructive discreation) with gentle *Gelassenheit*. Letting-be is the other of disfigurative and destructive violence. *Gelassenheit* does not disfigure and destroy; it allows a gift-*pragma* to appear in all its aporeticity: it lets the gift be a gift in all its *auto/poieticizing* freedom and necessary perceptibility. *Gelassenheit* is the gentlest receptivity.

But how does this gentle *Gelassenheit* differ from apathetic indifference? Schmitz remarks: "To accept it [the gift] absent-mindedly, with indifference or even hostility, would not really be to receive it at all."<sup>59</sup> Absent-mindedness and (a hostile or unethical) indifference merit some discussion. First, if creation is a gift, then we humans, in our everydayness, tend to receive it absent-mindedly: after all, who of us constantly interprets creation as freely given? As Webb most aptly puts it: "What is everywhere is easy to overlook."<sup>60</sup> Creation's giftness is concealed in its givenness.

In one sense, the tendency towards absent-mindedness is a good thing: to absentmindedly (which is close to unknowingly)—accept a gift preserves the

<sup>58</sup> Keller, *FD*, 80.

<sup>59</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 47-48.

<sup>60</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 95.

possibility that the gift is neither identified nor returned. However, this situation returns us to the fundamental aporia: the gift must be recognized as such, even though this recognition dislodges the giftness of the gift-thing. But it seems the experience of absent-mindedness is precisely the way in which we *usually* accept the creation-gift. Absent-mindedness therefore needs to be disrupted: the interpretation of creation as a gift stimulates this kind of ecologically minded interruption.

"Indifference" is a second category of reception. It is more negative than absent-mindedness because the world may be recognized as a gift, but the recipient is nonetheless not moved by this kind of awareness. While *Gelassenheit* is a letting-be, indifference is a letting-not-be. Unethical indifference conspires with discreation insofar as it allows violence to carry out its disfiguration and destruction. Hence, contrary to any connotation that *Gelassenheit* is conservative, letting-be is counter-cultural and even revolutionary in its opposition to instrumentalism, domination, and annihilation. Letting-be is the other of war—whether against humans or other others.<sup>61</sup> We can therefore counteract disfigurative and destructive violence by letting-be. Letting-be can heal these violations of creation.<sup>62</sup>

As is the case with spirituality (Christian and otherwise), letting-be is a fundamental axiom for environmental ethics, though it usually goes by other names: the "duty of noninterference," the "principle of nonmeddling," the "principle of minimum impact," and so on.<sup>63</sup> According to such a stance, Wallace explains that, for example, unnecessary building developments are to be opposed,

<sup>61</sup> Increasingly hi-tech warfare intensifies and widens the spheres of victimization, as the ecologically devastating 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars starkly illustrate. The rise of modern technology enables modern militarism to become, according to Ruether's informed evaluation, "the ultimate polluter of the earth." Ruether, *GG*, 109; refer to the section on "Militarism and War" in *GG*, 102-111. Global nuclear warfare would fundamentally disfigure the Earth-gift.

<sup>62</sup> Refer to McDaniel, *ESGM*, 105.

<sup>63</sup> Wallace cites these phrases during his critique of stewardship; Wallace, *FS*, 164. The expressions are employed in Paul W. Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 174 [hereafter Taylor, *RFN*]; Tom Regan, "The Nature and Possibility of an Environmental Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 3 (1981): 19-34, 31-32; and, Devall and Sessions, *DE*, 68.

while minimal use of some creatures in medical research is acceptable.<sup>64</sup> Of course, this letting-be would be radically extended in its reflection of the egalitarianism espoused here: letting-be applies to *all* things, including humanly constructed things. In a typically insightful article, Freya Mathews argues for a letting-be as it relates to urbanized environments: "allowing this world to go its own way" and therefore "letting the apartment blocks and warehouses and roads grow old."<sup>65</sup>

However, as I discuss in the next subsection, this letting-be would not stand alone: Mathews recognizes that our relation to these things is also marked by "use" and "adaptation" and that such interactions are "compatible with a fundamental attitude of letting be, of acquiescence in the given, and of working within its terms of reference, rather than insisting upon further cycles of demolition and 'redevelopment.'"<sup>66</sup> A recognition of a certain compatibility between letting-be and utility is crucial: it reflects and respects the gift's duality and our oscillating interactivity.

Considered scripturally and theologically, disfigurative and destructive discreation is a reversal of the biblical act of co/creation: rather than letting things be gifts, excessive violence destroys or deforms their coming-to-be. The biblical "Let there be . . ." indicates an understanding that *Elohim* opens up a "space" or possibility for the self-disclosure of things. Divine creativity may be thought as *a letting-be that possibilizes inter-corporeal letting-be*. Ecotheology also calls for *Gelassenheit*. Very early on in *The Body of God*, McFague raises and emphasizes the need for letting-be; she urges humans "Not to act, but to abstain; not to control, but to 'let be.'"<sup>67</sup> A construal of excessive violence in terms of its contrariety to *Gelassenheit* crosses McFague's eco-figuration of "sin": sin occurs when other creatures are not

<sup>64</sup> For a detailed systematic exposition of an ethic that hinges upon letting-be, refer to Taylor, *RFN*, 256-313.

<sup>65</sup> Freya Mathews, "Letting the World Grow Old: An Ethos of Countermodernity," in *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 3.2 (August 1999): 119-137, 124 [hereafter Mathews, *LW*].

<sup>66</sup> Mathews, *LW*, 124. Mathews adds: "Things which initially seemed discordant and out of place gradually fall into step with the rest of Creation. Old cars take their place beside old dogs and old trees; antiquity naturalises even the most jarring of trash."

<sup>67</sup> McFague, *TBC*, 6.

allowed their "needed space."<sup>68</sup> Not-letting-be is sinfully, excessively violent. McFague also connects this eco-abstinence or letting-be with humility: "A sensibility of abstinence and restraint suggests that we assume an attitude of humility . . ."<sup>69</sup> Humility is here figured as a condition for *Gelassenheit*: a humble response towards the creation-gift ensures its status as gift. Humility and letting-be interconnect to interact with the creation-gift in good and gentle ways.

#### 4.2.2 Instrumentality—Including Stewardship

During his discussion of *Gelassenheit*, Fox cites Reiner Schürmann's depiction of letting-be: "It designates the attitude of a human who no longer regards objects and events according to their *usefulness*, but who accepts them in their autonomy."<sup>70</sup> Such a noble intention and ambition, particularly in an age of excessive instrumentalism and manufacturing, certainly *substantially* motivates the present aporetics, and the notion of acceptance-in-autonomy is obviously (and brilliantly) reflected in discourses like Marion's phenomenology. But why is the qualifier "substantially" utilized here rather than a term like "absolute"? Why, in other words, can't we rest with letting-be?

According to the gift's aporeticity and the concomitant logic governing this work, letting-be should not exclusively determine our interactions with the creation-gift: an oscillational *êthos* allows other responses like instrumentality (and "even" return, discussed below). From a radically aporetic perspective, an openness towards a certain kind of instrumentality (as opposed to eco-destructive instrumentalism) should not be abandoned, even if abandonment were possible. The ability to "use" the gift reflects and embraces both the element of gratuity and identification in it. If the gift is identified in all its gratuity, then the givee is able to utilize it.

<sup>68</sup> McFague, *TBG*, 113.

<sup>69</sup> McFague, *TBG*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart: Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1978), 16; emphasis added; cited in Fox, *Br*, 224.

As surprising or even troubling as this claim may sound (and justifiably so—hence the quotation marks), an instrumental use of the gift is thoroughly appropriate: instrumentality is emblematic of the gift's circularity. In other words, the gift-recipient not only responds to the gift in ways that reflect the gift's excess (silences, tremblings, and "returns-without-return" like letting-be), but also in ways that reflect the gift's aspect of exchange: use is one such way.

Hence, according to an aporetic thinking of gifting, there is a place for industry and technology. The appropriateness of using the gift is confirmed in the phenomenon of human gifting: when one person gifts a gift to another, the non-use of the gift would, in all probability, offend the gift-giver. If creation is gift-ed, its use by the gift-recipient reflects and respects the element of recognition in the gift. Of course, the ecological crisis reveals what happens when our "use" of the creation-gift turns to *abuse*: according to the logic and language of the present aporetics, this devastating transformation occurs when any oscillational reception of, and relation with, the gift is halted and the gift is *exclusively* figured as a mere product without excess. Without any acknowledgment of its excess, the gift-thing is exclusively received in its utility—a reception that risks its abuse.

So how can the subject resist this devastating transformation? According to the present study, one may already begin to glean what is required: an instrumental treatment of the web of what-is would need to be held in tension with wonder and *Gelassenheit* (and other reactions and interactions) that honor the gift's mystery and autonomy. Tempered by *Gelassenheit*, our instrumentality would involve *oikologically* oriented practices of preserving products through the principles of durability and recyclability; McDaniel cites Cobb's and Birch's manifesto in this regard: "Manufactured goods will be built to last; durability will replace planned obsolescence. Wherever possible materials will be recycled."<sup>71</sup>

Reactions like awe, silence, and letting-be would oppose and restrict the severe instrumentalism, exploitation, and domination that inhere in modern

<sup>71</sup> Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 245; cited in McDaniel, 21.

science, industry, and technology. And so, when creation is considered a gift in all its aporeticity, its tension is honored and faithfully reflected only when its reception involves an oscillation between both its aspects: exchange (use) and excess (silence, trembling, letting-be).

Heidegger proves illuminating both in terms of indicating a using (*brauchen*) which is a kind of "saving" (indicated by terms like *schonen* and *retten*), as well as an oscillation between using and letting-be. Foltz explains the Heideggerian conception of using: "The German *schonen* does not mean to refrain from using something or to set it aside, but to use it in such a way that harm is not inflicted upon it; used reflexively or with regard to things, it means 'to look after,'" and "to use it while nevertheless keeping it sound and intact."<sup>72</sup> And so: "using must be sharply distinguished from mere utilizing, exploiting, and using up—all of which represent degenerate kinds of using."<sup>73</sup>

The notion of "saving" (*retten*) is another recovered Heideggerian concept linking ecological safeguarding and letting-be; Heidegger instructs:

Mortals dwell in that they save the earth—taking the word in the old sense. . . . Saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save really means to set something free into its own presencing. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from spoilation.<sup>74</sup>

In his Heideggerian meditation, Foltz perfectly captures an oscillational relation between saving, using, and letting-be: "It [saving] means, rather, to allow the earth to be earth—to allow the earth its own self-seclusion and withdrawal as well as to allow its supporting and nourishing character. This, in turn, entails a using of the

<sup>72</sup> Foltz, *IIE*, 161.

<sup>73</sup> Foltz, *IIE*, 161.

<sup>74</sup> Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 145-161, 150.

earth rather than some sort of pseudo-respectful onlooking. But it must be a . . . responsive use [*schonen*] that allows the earth to reveal its sustaining power . . ."<sup>75</sup> Whatever else may be involved in a "responsive use" (the details of which would exceed the present study's limits), responses that oscillate between *besychia*, letting-be and bewilderment, on the one hand, and an eco-use, on the other, would certainly contribute to creation's sustenance and resist its devastation by means of severe instrumentalism and technologism.

Fascinatingly, one may locate or figure the call for an oscillation between use and a saving/letting-be in the *NRSV* version of Genesis 2.15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."<sup>76</sup> "To till" is to cultivate or produce; "to keep" (in this particular context) is to save or sustain. The command is given in Genesis 2.15 that there be a double movement in terms of the way the creation-gift is received: on the one hand, there should be a certain agricultural *use* of the garden-gift; on the other, the gift should be "kept" or *saved*, allowed to let-be.<sup>77</sup>

How does theology treat the question of the creation-gift's instrumentality? A rare and remarkable passage on the inherent goodness of creation-gifts and a concomitant responsible use appears in one of Augustine's letters: "*use* the world, *as not abusing it*, so that with its *good things* you may do good, not become bad through *possessing* them. Because *these things are in themselves good*, and are not given to men [sic]

<sup>75</sup> Foltz, *IIE*, 165.

<sup>76</sup> The Hebrew term for "till," *abad*, may be more accurately translated as "serve"—which refigures the verse as radically ecological (i.e., to serve the garden/earth); refer to, e.g., Theodore Hiebert, "The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions," in Hessel and Ruether, *CE*, 135-154, 140f; and, Calvin B. Dewitt, "Behemoth and Batrachians in the Eye of God: Responsibility to Other Kinds in Biblical Perspective," in *CE*, 291-316, 301-303. However, I bracket the question of ("precise") translation for the sake of illuminating the notion of eco-oscillation.

<sup>77</sup> I noticed the oscillation in the *NRSV* translation of this verse when reading Vasileios (Archimandrite), *Ecology and Monasticism* (Montreal: Alexander Press, 1996). Ecotheologians like Sittler and Moltmann attend to this eco-affirmative biblical verse; refer to Sittler, e.g., *TSS*, 37-38; Moltmann, *GC*, 30.

except by Him. . . .”<sup>78</sup> Note the fact that Augustine is here insisting that, while there is a degree of instrumentalism and possessiveness at work, it should not lead to *the abuse* of things—not only because they are divine gifts but “because these things are in themselves good.” Augustine urges a responsible use for the sake of the things themselves, and for God’s sake.

In the following text, Leo the Great (fifth century) also urges a responsible use of gift-ed creation-things; however, in this case, respect is configured in more starkly theocentric terms:

“For not only are spiritual riches and heavenly gifts received from God, but earthly and material possessions also proceed from His bounty, that He may be justified in requiring an account of those things which He has not so much put in our possession as committed to our stewardship. God’s gifts, therefore, we must use properly and wisely, lest the material for good work should become an occasion of sin.”<sup>79</sup>

This text merits a number of comments. Observe how the first part of the first sentence of this passage is quite inclusive: Leo weakens the hierarchical bifurcation between “spiritual riches and heavenly gifts” and “earthly and material possessions,” for they *all* “proceed” from God’s “bounty,” even though the bifurcation perhaps remains in terms of construing all things spiritual as “gifts” and all things corporeal as “possessions.”

Now, the second part of the first sentence and the first part of the second sentence are extremely significant, for they introduce the question of stewardship. To begin with, the *OED* defines “stewardship” as: “The responsible use of resources, esp. money, time, and talents, in the service of God.” Leo’s text accords with this definition: the creation-gifts or “material possessions” are themselves cast theocentrically: they are *not* the “possessions” of humans in any absolute,

<sup>78</sup> Augustine immediately adds that these things are gifts. Augustine, *Letter 220*, § 10, on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-01/npnf1-01-23.htm#P6197\\_2900574](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-01/npnf1-01-23.htm#P6197_2900574)> 1 August 2003.

<sup>79</sup> Leo the Great, “Sermon Ten” (“On the Collections”), Part Five, § 1, in *PNF*, on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-12/Npnf2-12-177.htm#P2817\\_653792](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-12/Npnf2-12-177.htm#P2817_653792)> 1 August 2003.

capitalistic sense but rather things “committed to our stewardship.” Stewardship destabilizes any notion of absolute human authority over creation: the earth remains God’s. As Ruether explains: “Nature is not private property to be done away with as one wishes . . .”<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the notion of “responsible use” moves away from the idea of an unscrupulous plundering of things for human manipulation and consumption: Leo indicates a certain responsibility towards things, even though the motivation is theological (the specter of sin) rather than ecological.

The link between creation-gifts and stewardship is identified centuries later in McDaniel’s *Earth, Sky, Gods and Mortals*. To begin with, McDaniel proposes an oscillating ecological spirituality, in which one perceives “matter as alive with intrinsic value,” on the one hand, and “land as a subject of kindly use,” on the other.<sup>81</sup> Pursuing the idea of utility, McDaniel notes that “the earth is something we use, and hence something that has instrumental value for us,” and goes on to discuss the question of the land, and, more specifically, the soil, echoing the directive of Genesis 2.15 when he mentions that “it is something to be tilled . . .”<sup>82</sup> To be sure, the land and soil has “intrinsic value” which we humans have barely recognized, and that “use has become abuse.”<sup>83</sup> However, rather than promoting the notion of “*no use*,” McDaniel proposes that stewardship is a kindly use that does not lead to abuse.<sup>84</sup>

Informed by biblical figurations of human-land relations, McDaniel argues that human stewardship would be marked by the attitudes of love, unity, dependency, and indebtedness.<sup>85</sup> This kind of nuanced stewardship therefore

<sup>80</sup> Ruether, *GG*, 210.

<sup>81</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 85, 93-95.

<sup>82</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 93.

<sup>83</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 94, 95.

<sup>84</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 97. McDaniel points out that the phrase “kindly use” is coined by Wendell Berry.

<sup>85</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 100-101. McDaniel cites the following biblical texts: Gen 2.4-4.16; Ps 8, 9, 74, 104; Is 40.12-31, 45.9-13, 48.12-13; Jer 27.5, 32.17; Prov 3.19-20, 8.22-31. McDaniel, *ESGM*, 97.

exceeds an anthropocentric stewardship which opens onto resourceful management and outright exploitation. It is at this point of the text that McDaniel introduces the notion of the soil as a gift, *precisely because* of its utility. McDaniel sets the land's giftness apart from its autonomy: "It [the soil] is a 'gift' to us even as it has life for itself. It is a gift in the sense that it is given to our species, and other species as well . . . it is a godsend, an unasked for and unmerited foundation for our existence and that of other creatures."<sup>86</sup> The land-gift may be kindly used because it is a gift.

However, McDaniel does not propose a one-way gifting: he argues that the soil-gift may be "complemented" by also (and impressively) proposing that "we humans can be gifts to the soil. Just as the soil can be an instrument for our purposes, so we can be an instrument for its well-being. . . . by acting to preserve and maintain its health and integrity."<sup>87</sup> Of course, according to the present gift-aporetics, the notion that "we humans can be gifts to the soil" would be a heuristic advice, for identification of the gift is, as far as we can tell, part of the human hermeneutical enterprise. Whatever the case, return enters McDaniel's striking account: the gratuitous gift of the soil is complemented, completed, or balanced when we gift-recipients return the gift by being gifts ourselves. In the name of ecology, the soil-gift's gratuity is completed by its return. But this return is ecological: otherwise stewardly use risks turning into abuse.

Interestingly, Wallace also couples the gift and stewardship, but for the sake of critiquing stewardship from a biblical perspective: "nature is valued for its utility for humankind because it is God's gift for the care and preservation of human communities. The problem with this seemingly scripturally sanctioned, human-centered ethic, however, is that it does not tell the whole story concerning the

<sup>86</sup> McDaniel adds: "Inasmuch as God is responsible for the gift through the long and gradual processes of inorganic evolution, God is the giver of the gift." McDaniel, *ESGM*, 101. According to McDaniel's own acceptance of the notion of co-creation, perhaps God should be expressed here as "co-giver."

<sup>87</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*, 101. The definition of *complementum* is provided by the *OED*.

biblical view of nature."<sup>88</sup> What is the whole story? The Bible is marked by anthropocentric *and* biocentric texts. Wallace powerfully recalls the Book of Job and the way in which it decenters and resituates human beings in "the fragile economy of the wild and sacred world of creation."<sup>89</sup> Wallace implores that we heed its biocentrism, which means superseding stewardship and honoring the Earth's autonomy; he concludes (with emphasis): "*Instead of paternalistically arrogating to ourselves the role of being divinely appointed stewards over all living things, we would serve creation better by refiguring ourselves as temporary sojourners on the earth who should practice a 'hands-off' ethic toward other life-forms.*"<sup>90</sup> And so, instead of "protection and stewardship," Wallace calls for a vocabulary of "humility and caution."<sup>91</sup>

Stewardship is problematic not only from a biblical perspective, but also in the context of the present gift-aporetics: stewardship is thoroughly circular; as the *OED* definition illustrates ("The responsible use of resources, esp. money, time, and talents, in the service of God"), this notion resonates strongly with mercantilism: things are considered as "resources": capital, stock, property—and this term nowadays is, as Heidegger insightfully gleaned, extended to humans ("human resources").<sup>92</sup> These resources are put into "service" for something or someone else. Even if this other is a loving God (and I come back to this "if" in a moment), these resources are figured according to their servicing of/to this other. The commercial dimension to stewardship is reinforced by Leo's text, with his

<sup>88</sup> Wallace, *FS*, 159.

<sup>89</sup> Wallace, *FS*, 159-161. Also refer to Keller's detailed reading of Job in *FD*, ch.7. Wallace also refers to the ecocentrism in Genesis 1 and 2.

<sup>90</sup> Wallace, *FS*, 167.

<sup>91</sup> McFague also questions stewardship. Her criticism of an anthropocentrism that locates us as "the point and goal of creation," and her refiguration of humanity's role as "God's partners," therefore "presses us beyond stewardship of life on earth to solidarity with all earth's creatures . . ." *TBG*, 197.

<sup>92</sup> Heidegger, *QCT*, 18.

utilization of terms like "possession/s," "requiring an account," and "use."<sup>93</sup> Wallace argues against a stewardship in which we are "wise custodians of the resources that are 'ours'" and argues for a radical ethic in which we humans lead "simple life-styles that register minimal impact on the rich ecosystem that belongs to all of 'us.'"<sup>94</sup>

However, further objections arise in terms of the "other" towards which we render our services. First, in light of the undecidability and radically ecumenical openness which marks the present aporetics, the question of this "other" is here suspended (deferred but also plays along the margins): ultimately, a monotheistic stewardship could only be practiced if the question of this "other" is closed or fixed. Stewardship is a limited response based on a limited characterization of the divine other. It loses a certain degree of its force (and appeal) in the context of a radical *oikoumenism*. Moreover, *even if* one identifies a divine co-creator or co-gift-giver, and is therefore able to apply the principle of stewardship, this identification is problematic insofar as stewardship has been historically linked with the dominant (and domineering) depictions of deity. Wallace identifies a relation between a monarchical model of God and stewardship. He prefaces his critique of stewardship by demonstrating that this model of care is based on a univocal interpretation of Scripture regarding its figuration of the relation between humans and other creatures.

Now, keeping in mind Wallace's powerful critique of stewardship, and the additional concerns raised here, I would nevertheless caution against the wholesale elimination of the possibility of stewardship as *one kind* of response to the creation-gift. McDaniel's nuanced reconfiguration of this age-old principle is ecological and biblical, and it certainly moves away from any classical and problematic

<sup>93</sup> As to the question of whether and to what extent Leo resists thinking the gift in terms of exchange, textually he only explicitly stipulates the aneconomic when discussing grace: "And yet surely, unless it is given freely, it is not a gift . . ." "Letter One: To the Bishop of Aquileia," § 3, in *PNF*, on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-12/Npnf2-12-06.htm>> 5 September 2003.

<sup>94</sup> Wallace, *FS*, 144.

formulation. Like Wallace, McDaniel attempts to refigure stewardship as a low-impact reception of the creation-gift. In the open and oscillational spirit of this thesis, the following possibility is offered: that a nuanced, *kindly* eco-stewardship forms *but one* of our responses towards the creation-gift.

#### 4.2.3 Playing With Creation

Our response to the creation-gift should not freeze with the response of an eco-instrumentality or any other reaction: if creation is a gift, we would also (and often do) respond with delight.<sup>95</sup> An oscillation between utility and enjoyment is intimated by McFague when, in relation to the question of other-than-human animals, she rhetorically asks: "Do we not also delight in them and value them, not just for their usefulness to us . . .?"<sup>96</sup> Hence, while an oscillational use of the creation-gift is a proper response to it, enjoyment of the creation-gift is another, proper response. Indeed, it is perhaps the most appropriate pro-active response *to* the gift, for joy respects and reflects the gift's gratuity in an exceptional way: enjoyment exceeds instrumentality: the gift is enjoyed rather than received economically or returned religiously. Pleasure surpasses calculation. Fox, for instance, announces: "Living without a why means enjoying gifts . . ."<sup>97</sup> Delighting in the gift transgresses the epistemic desire for a knowledge of origins and outcomes. (A certain "Delightenment" would, in other words, counteract the excesses of Enlightenment.) In my discussion of Caputo's critique of Marion's phenomenological gift, I agreed that the responses of affirmation and celebration are proper responses to freely given creation. The question of enjoyment was only intimated in the previous chapter, and merits further attention.

<sup>95</sup> When Russell Belk outlines a number of characteristics of the gift, he includes the gift's ability to delight. Russell Belk, "The Perfect Gift," in *Gift-Giving: A Research Anthology*, ed. Cele Otnes and Richard F. Beltramini (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 59-84, 61. Other characteristics cited by Belk include sacrificiality, pleasure, luxuriousness, appropriateness, surprise, and desire.

<sup>96</sup> McFague, *TBG*, 122.

<sup>97</sup> Fox, *Br*, 206; also refer to *Br*, 203f.

The playful recipient enjoys the gift beyond intention, utility, or possession. Mark C. Taylor identifies a relation between play, its transgression of reason/s, and gratuity. The remarkable (and hyperbolic) passage warrants lengthy citation:

Play is, first of all, purposeless. The player . . . needs no goals, rewards, or results. . . . Play ends when it is taken seriously or is pursued for the sake of a definite purpose. In a certain sense, play, in contrast to work(s), has no reason. . . . Play, which is always free and can never be bought, breaks the closed circuit of appropriation that characterizes utilitarian consumerism. Though play is all-consuming and all-possessing, players neither consume nor possess. . . . Unlike the faithful son, the prodigal neither returns nor demands a return. . . . [P]lay appears to be totally frivolous. . . . As a result of its purposelessness and insubstantiality, play appears to be completely gratuitous.<sup>98</sup>

Purposelessness is the (often forgotten) other of severely "purposeful" phenomena (definitive discourses and totalizing practices): enjoyment, marked as it is by purposelessness, therefore resists those excessive phenomena that contribute to the ecological crisis. Enjoyment destabilizes the threat that comes from the "utilitarian consumerism" that exceeds any appropriate use of the creation-gift. Webb discusses the theologian, Horace Bushnell, with regard to the turn to play: "history shows religion evolving from the labor of the law to the spontaneity of play. Work, he [Bushnell] thought, designates conscious, intended effort, whereas play is carefree and formless, and he was glad that religion, in his day, was moving into its proper sphere in the impulsive free play of the human spirit liberated from the

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, *Er*, 158-160. As a matter of interest, Taylor makes the following claim a few pages later, which resonates with an oscillational logic: "Erring necessarily involves a *double movement* of resignation and acceptance . . ." *Er*, 166.

oppressively goal-driven constraints of labor."<sup>99</sup> Playing with the gift counteracts the work and calculation involved with its return.

In the text upon which the present thesis turns, *Given Time*, purposeless celebration is also celebrated. Derrida depicts the practice of smoking according to a vocabulary of a playful excess: "unproductive expenditure"/"luxury," "expending at a pure loss, for pure auto-affective pleasure";<sup>100</sup> "the object of a pure and luxurious consumption," "gratuitous and therefore costly, an expenditure at a loss that produces a pleasure."<sup>101</sup> Celebration is linked to gratuity in a "desire beyond need": "The offering and the use of tobacco give access to honor and virtue by raising one above the pure and simple economic circulation of so-called natural needs and productions, above the level of the necessary. It is the moment of celebration and luxury, of gratuity as well as liberty."<sup>102</sup> Enjoyment is also linked to surprise and wonder: "Pleasure is always and first of all the pleasure of being surprised. . . . The cause of pleasure in the other is surprise, the passion of wonder, as at the origin of philosophy (the *thaumazein* [wonder] as originary pathos of the philosopher, according to Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, since philosophy has no other cause)."<sup>103</sup> Enjoying the tobacco-gift or philosophy (both of which can be gift/*Gift*) stands in stark contrast with the utilitarianism and violence that marks much of our reception of the matrix of beings. And so, the reaction of enjoyment certainly reflects the gratuity of the creation-gift.

But is there an *éthos* to fun? Play is certainly responsible in its resistance to totalization; Peter Quigley aptly sums up the responsibility in playing: "Play is not

<sup>99</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 137-138. Refer to Horace Bushnell, *Work and Play* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1881). Webb also cites Norman O. Brown with regard to the relation between gifting and playing: "Giving is a way of celebrating the life instinct by fusing sexual desire and social needs in a playful, earthy exuberance." Webb, *TGG*, 66; refer to Brown, *Life against Death* (New York: Vintage, 1959); also refer to Brown, *Love's Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

<sup>100</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 103.

<sup>101</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 107.

<sup>102</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 113. Derrida also expresses speech in a lexicon of hyperbolic enjoyment: "superabundant, excessive, generous, useless, redundant, luxurious." Derrida, *GT*, 104.

<sup>103</sup> Derrida, *GT*, 146.

to be understood in the sense of irresponsibility, but in the sense of dissent from the seriousness of those who claim to possess the truth that can be structured and enforced."<sup>104</sup> Play and humility are inter-related: they distance themselves from any totalizing truths. Play resists the excesses of *epistémè*.

One may even suggest that playing points towards a kind of eco-politics. Kate Soper sketches a relation between social change and an "alternative hedonist vision" in her book *What is Nature?*<sup>105</sup> Soper proposes: "Our experience of life might, after all, be altogether more heady and exotic were it to be less narrowly fixated on the acquisition of resource-hungry, cumbersome, short-lived, junk-creating commodities."<sup>106</sup> An eco-playful society entails neither a reduction of living standards ("but rather an altered conception of the standard itself") nor a "mass conversion to otherworldliness." Key features include "space to play and time to be idle" and a willingness to "pay the price in terms of a more modest and less privatized structure of material satisfactions."<sup>107</sup> Enjoyment and its interrelated phenomena (affirmation, celebration, pleasure, idleness, etc.) not only respect and reflect the gratuity of the gift but obviously contribute ecologically by doing that which is otherwise than disfigurative or destructive. Creation is played with—not manipulated to the point of destruction. We delight in it rather than totalize it. Enjoyment of the gift, together with *hegychia*, humility, and letting-be, all contribute to an eco-*êthos* that responds to the gift's prior-ity and gratuity.

In what ways are divinity, freely given creation, and enjoyment related? The idea of enjoying and playing with the gift and the creation-gift has a long history. First, certain scriptural moments present a playful correlation between co/creator and creation. Keller proposes that the biblical reaction to creation in Genesis ("And God saw that it was good") may not be "mere self-congratulation" but

<sup>104</sup> Peter Quigley, "Rethinking Resistance," in *Postmodern Environmental Ethics*, ed. Max Oelschlaeger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 173-192, 186.

<sup>105</sup> Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 270 [hereafter Soper, *WTN*].

<sup>106</sup> Soper, *WTN*, 269.

<sup>107</sup> Soper, *WTN*, 269.

"spontaneous delight . . .": from the very beginning of the Bible, joy is presented as a divine response to creation.<sup>108</sup> Moltmann figures the God who "rests" on the seventh day (Gen 2.3-4) as the God who celebrates: "The resting God, the celebrating God, the God who rejoices over his [sic] creation . . ."<sup>109</sup> One is reminded here of the beautiful, powerful line by Angelus Silesius: "*God plays with creation.*"<sup>110</sup>

According to Psalm 104, God creates the monstrous Leviathan and lets it play.<sup>111</sup> Biblical exegetes like Keller and Carol A. Newsom discern a kind of *oikological jouissance* in the Book of Job. Delight features in Newsom's enunciation of this revelation: "This new image is one of God as a power for life, balancing the needs of all creatures, not just humans, cherishing freedom, full of fierce love and delight for each thing without regard for its utility, acknowledging the deep interconnectedness of death and life, restraining and nurturing each element in the ecology of creation."<sup>112</sup> And so, Scripture itself refers to divinity's recreational interactivity with creation.

Furthermore, humans are also urged to enjoy creation-gifts. As I noted in the second chapter (§ 2.1.1), there is a remarkable passage in Scripture (Eccles 5.18-19) that supports the notion that creation-*pragmata*, specifically figured as gifts, should be enjoyed by creatures, but it bears repeating: "This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he [sic] enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God."

<sup>108</sup> Keller, *FD*, 195.

<sup>109</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, 6.

<sup>110</sup> Silesius, *TCW*, Bk. 2: 198. This remark is cited by Derrida, *SLN*, in Derrida, *ON*, 75.

<sup>111</sup> Psalm 104.26: "There [the sea] go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it."

<sup>112</sup> Newsom, "Job," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (London: SPCK, 1992), 138-144, 136; cited in Keller, *FD*, 140; also refer to Keller, *FD*, ch. 7.

Likewise, there are a number of theological moments that stress enjoyment of the creation-gift/s. One of the earliest instances of the pairing of "creation" and "gift" in recorded Christian theology promotes the enjoyment of corporeal gifts. Citing Psalm 104.15, Ignatius (30-107) advises: "'Wine makes glad the heart of man [sic], and oil exhilarates, and bread strengthens him.' But all are to be used with moderation, *as being the gifts of God.*"<sup>113</sup> While the statement from Ignatius demonstrates a kind of instrumentality, it is nevertheless mediated by restraint and enjoyment: creation-gifts like wine, oil, and bread are not to be abused, for they are divinely gift-ed. Tertullian displays the sentiment of delight when he mentions "my present enjoyment of the earthly gift."<sup>114</sup> Augustine also urges enjoyment of corporeal gifts, and this rare summons is ecologically powerful: "Who has not this Mercy of God . . . that he enjoys this light, this air, rain, fruits, diversity of seasons, and all the earthly comforts, health of body, the affection of friends, the safety of his family? All these are good, and they are God's gifts . . ."<sup>115</sup>

Rather than emphasizing indebtedness towards the richness of creation, Chrysostom, citing Paul, encourages delight: "'But in the living God,' he [Paul] says, 'who gives us richly all things to enjoy.' [1 Tim 6.17c] This 'all things richly' is justly spoken, in reference to *the changes of the year, to air, light, water, and other gifts.* For how richly and ungrudgingly are all these bestowed!"<sup>116</sup> The call for the response of delight towards the gift is also promoted by Aquinas, and even contrasted with the response of indebtedness: "Gift as a personal name in God does not imply

<sup>113</sup> Ignatius, *The Epistle of Ignatius to Hero, a Deacon of Antioch*, ch. 1, in ANF, on CCEL <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-30.htm#P2787\\_452241](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-30.htm#P2787_452241)> 1 August 2003.

<sup>114</sup> Tertullian, *FB*, Bk. III, ch. 25, in ANF, on CCEL <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-30.htm#P4763\\_1515567](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-30.htm#P4763_1515567)> 1 August 2003.

<sup>115</sup> Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 36*, par. 6, in PNF, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-08/npnf1-08-47.htm>> 1 August 2003; also refer to *Exposition on Psalm 37*, par. 10, in PNF, on CCEL <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-08/npnf1-08-44.htm#P994\\_469164](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-08/npnf1-08-44.htm#P994_469164)> 1 August 2003. Augustine's *City of God* also refers to enjoyment of corporeal gifts; refer to *City of God*, Bk. XIX, ch. 10, in PNF, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers/NPNF1-02/Augustine/cog/t107.htm>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>116</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on the First Epistle of St Paul to Timothy*, "Homily Eighteen," in PNF, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-13/npnf1-13-99.htm>> 1 August 2003.

subjection [an extreme form of indebtedness], but only origin, as regards the giver; but as regards the one to whom it is given, it implies a free use, or enjoyment . . ."<sup>117</sup> With a little help from *ex nihilo*, Thomas Traherne joyfully declares: "It is an inestimable joy that I was raised out of nothing to see and enjoy this glorious world: It is a Sacred Gift . . ."<sup>118</sup>

Andrew Murray also ponders the idea of an enjoyable return of creation-gifts in *The Deeper Christian Life*; the relevant passage deserves to be extensively cited because it is a rare archival-theological example of a more sustained (and extremely exuberant) reflection wrestling with the paradox of gifting:

"God gives all, I receive all, I give all. . . . God does so rejoice in what we give to Him. It is not only I that am the receiver and the giver, but God is the Giver and the Receiver too, and, may I say it with reverence, has more pleasure in the receiving back than even in giving. With our little faith we often think they come back to God again all defiled. God says, 'No, they come back beautiful and glorified'; . . . with a new value and beauty. Ah! child of God you do not know how precious the gift that you bring to your Father, is in His sight. Have I not seen a mother give a piece of cake, and the child comes and offers her a piece to share it with her? How she values the gift! And your God, oh, my friends, your God, His heart, His Father's heart of love, longs, longs, longs to have you give Him everything. It is not a demand. It is a demand, but it is not a demand of a hard Master, it is the call of a loving Father, who knows that every gift you bring to God will bind you closer to Himself . . . . Oh, friends! a gift to God has in His sight infinite value. It delights Him."<sup>119</sup>

<sup>117</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, I.38.1 ("Of the Name of the Holy Ghost, As Gift"), on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FP/FP038.html>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>118</sup> Traherne, *CM*, "The First Century," par. 92, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/traherne/centuries.all.html>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>119</sup> Murray, *DCL*, "Consecration," § 4, on CCEL <[http://www.ccel.org/m/murray/deeper/deeper\\_life08.htm](http://www.ccel.org/m/murray/deeper/deeper_life08.htm)> 8 August 2003.

This call for delighting in the creation-gift is also registered by late-modern theology. Moltmann, for instance, stresses that God's day of rest (Gen 2.2-3) and the sabbath commandment (Ex 20.8-11) signify the requirement for the other of work: the time is taken for humans and other-than-human others to enjoy and celebrate creation. In Leviticus 25.4 and 25.11, this instruction is eco-democratically extended to *all* of creation: Moses is instructed that every seventh year "there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land . . ." and that, during every fiftieth year (Jubilee), humans are to do the same. Sabbath and Jubilee are obviously strong ecological phenomena: they allow the earth to be.<sup>120</sup> Recalling divine recreation, McDaniel also urges us to enjoy creation; he reflects: "to share with humans and with other creatures that capacity to enjoy, and indeed to enjoy our joy, must be one of God's supreme pleasures."<sup>121</sup>

Sittler also relates enjoyment to letting-be, and figures enjoyment as a primary relation to creation: "To enjoy means to let a thing be itself and rejoice in it. So the first relation we have to the earth is to enjoy it . . . because, says Augustine, if you enjoy a thing, you will not abuse it."<sup>122</sup> Citing Eckhart, Fox concludes the (above-mentioned) discourse on *Gelassenheit* and *hesychia* by connecting a "gentle and receptive silence" to a return to God that produces freedom: "we shall be free—as free as God is—to play 'by his side . . . delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere in the world."<sup>123</sup> Webb affirms creation in the following statement: "The communion meal that looks forward to the Messianic banquet makes giving not only concrete but also festive. Giving occurs not only through suffering but also joy."<sup>124</sup> Finally, Schmitz affirms creation's relationality according to the logic of gifting: "The gift, then, is the medium in and through

<sup>120</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, 285; also refer to Moltmann on play, *GC*, 310-312.

<sup>121</sup> McDaniel, *ESGM*

<sup>122</sup> Sittler, *TSS*, 21.

<sup>123</sup> Fox, *Br*, 225; Fox does not provide reference details for this quotation.

<sup>124</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 151.

which giver and recipient affirm their being-in-the-world-together. It is the place of the celebration of their co-presence."<sup>125</sup>

As I noted in the previous chapter, one of Caputo's queries to Marion at the conclusion of the Villanova exchange is, in effect, a call to receiving creation in an affirmative and celebratory way: "If creation is a gift, then it is not a debt but something we affirm and celebrate." I return to this either/or (expressed in the form of a "not/but") in the following subsection, but Caputo's call for affirmation is certainly affirmed here. With Nietzsche, Derrida, Caputo, and Horner, I agree that we (especially the religious) have not properly affirmed and celebrated creation, but we have, on the contrary, focused on its obligation and return. Now, Caputo's call for celebration may be traced back to a text like *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, where he points towards "a theology of the world as gift," and the kingdom of God that would accompany it. His remarks on the place of play are typically inspiring: "The kingdom is a kingdom of children at play, playing with the freedom of the children of God."<sup>126</sup> The creation-gift of God: a playground. Of course, a radically *oikological* playground would be one in which *all* things are allowed to play freely.

All of these reflections on joy and playfulness (from the biblical to the archival-theological to the late-modern) not only reflect the gratuity of the gift; from an explicitly ecological perspective, they contrast sharply with any residual asceticism that, by definition, is marked by a disdain for the corporeal. To enjoy corporeality is to respect and reflect creation's giftness. And so, enjoyment may be considered an active response *par excellence*. Indeed, it should become more prevalent: rather than focusing on indebtedness and obligation, we subjects should enjoy the gift *more*. Playing with creation would obviously contribute to the end of domineering and damaging circumscription and abuse. To be sure, an ecological play would *gently* celebrate, affirm, and conserve creation, rather than deplete it or wear it out, for, as is the case with *hesychia* and letting-be, an eco-playfulness

<sup>125</sup> Schmitz, *TGC*, 81.

<sup>126</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 228.

contrasts sharply with violence. An unrestricted, free-for-all recreationism leads to discreation (as is the case with unrestricted "game" fishing, unbridled snow skiing, etc.).

And so, perceiving what-is as a gift may direct humans towards a more eco-playful relationship with it, which would dislodge the increasingly dominant relations of disfigurement and destruction. It is imperative that creation enjoys itself—its survival depends on it.

#### 4.2.4 Refiguring Return

Enjoying freely given creation *already* reflects the economic aspect of the gift, for enjoyment responds to both its aspects: its identification and its gratuity. In other words, the subject consciously enjoys the gift because it has been *identified* as a gift. Enjoyment arises according to the act of recognition. Hence, enjoyment, as an intentional reaction, is a kind of "return," or, more accurately, it approximates a "return-without-return," because it does not dwell on calculation, indebtedness, or repayment. But how should these heavily circular responses to the creation-gift be construed? Should they be abandoned as responses to the creation-gift?

While the gift-recipient should certainly (and perhaps primarily) receive the gift in enjoyment, an explicitly oscillational encounter with what-is should not cease: like instrumentality and stewardship, there is also a place for active return. It is an inevitable part of the process of gifting, for the gift's recognition will lead to a variety of responses, including the range of commercial reactions. The category of explicit return is a fitting response to the creation-gift *insofar as* it respects and reflects its circularity. (The qualifying phrase "insofar as" alludes to a nuancing that is developed over the course of this subsection.) To be sure, a defense of circular responses to the gift may sound strange and contradictory, but this strangeness does not weaken the argument; on the contrary, it signals its rigor: the gift itself requires thinking contradictorily. (After all, strangeness is no stranger to the aporia.) Nevertheless, as I explain in due course, the inclusion of return as a proper

response to the gift-creation makes more sense as I explain its *place* in the context of oscillation.

Now, responses like obligation and indebtedness are not only warranted on theoretical grounds, but this kind of response to creation is ecologically crucial. If creation were to be received purely in terms of enjoyment, then it *risks* being exclusively objectified as a plaything. Foltz cites this risk as it relates to other-than human *phusis* in his criticism of Lévinas: "Even in the work of Levinas, nature seems to be nothing more than a source for 'objects of enjoyment'—a view unlikely to promote more than indirect regard for the natural environment in its own right."<sup>127</sup> This charge is dubious because, first, it undermines the profundity of fun (a typical reaction by "serious" philosophy; one is reminded here of Taylor's and Quigley's remarks on seriousness); and, second, because Lévinas' enjoyment is counteracted by a profound ethicism (to which I return in a moment).<sup>128</sup>

Bracketing the unfairness of the charge, Foltz's concern about this kind of objectification of creation is certainly legitimate and therefore needs to be acknowledged and considered: if creation is exclusively figured as an object of enjoyment, then instrumentalism enters our interactivity. A wildlife "park" should not be construed simply as a piece of commodified creation to be consumed by "wildlife lovers" (akin to a theme park that is visited by all-consuming "fun lovers"). As Heidegger sharply phrases it (and understandably so), the Rhine River has not only been forced to become a "water power supplier," but also "an object on call for inspection by a tour group ordered there by the vacation industry."<sup>129</sup> When creation is challenged and set up according to often-burdensome human manipulation and utilization, the gift risks becoming objectified, its excess is denied, and its giftness is therefore threatened.

<sup>127</sup> Foltz, *ITE*, xi, n.2; he cites Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991) [hereafter Lévinas, *TAI*].

<sup>128</sup> On the question of seriousness in thinkers like Heidegger, refer to Scott, *LT*, 72, 113-115.

<sup>129</sup> Heidegger, *QCT*, 16.

And so, the following path is offered as a resistance against the possibility of objectification: while we gift-recipients should certainly play with the gift (as well as respond to it in terms of *hesychia*, *Gelassenheit*, and so on), there is also a certain requirement (and space) for those responses that are explicitly circular (gratitude, indebtedness, praise, etc.). Responsibility would ensure that our play does not disfigure or discreate the creation-gift.

Since return (and responsibility) would be included as one of our responses to the creation-gift, one is better able to register a further problem with the excesses of Nietzschean and Emersonian squandering (§ 2.2.2): the idea of an excessive and exclusive play or expenditure without reserve seems to leave no room for indebtedness. Webb considers Emerson as a classic protagonist of debt-free expenditure: "With an inestimable influence, Emerson was the first to articulate the North American [or, more broadly, western] fantasy of acting the spendthrift without incurring any debt."<sup>130</sup> This notion of expenditure without reserve is ecologically risky—disastrous—because it promotes the notion that the matrix of beings is an endless resource or standing-reserve expended in an all-consuming manner. Excessive squandering obviously leaves no room for *Gelassenheit* and reciprocity. Excessive and constant consumption and consumerism lead to the destruction of the creation-gift, a violence inflicted and witnessed by us today. If enjoyment is to be an ecologically responsible response to this gift, then it cannot be an all-consuming expenditure.

According to an oscillational thinking of gifting, how would the specific phenomenon of *religious* return (sacrifice, praise, indebtedness, etc.) be figured? Once again, I preface my remarks by acknowledging that there is no denying the contradictoriness of the tension between the response of expenditure (reflecting gratuity), on the one hand, and religious return (reflecting identification), on the other: indeed, this contradictoriness is made starker when considering *Christian* returns of the gift because, as I noted in my retracing of the word "gift" in

<sup>130</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 57. Elsewhere, Webb instructs: "Taking the liberal position to the extreme would glorify giving without counting the cost that generosity often entails." *TGG*, 26.

Christian writings, the notion of the *unconditional* gift—particularly grace—becomes an important one. The belief that God gifts unconditionally has become axiomatic for Christianity. *And yet*, the thought and practice arises in which gift-recipients (believers) are bound to the gift-giver (God): religiosity is moved or marked by an indebtedness towards the divine. In accordance with the radicalism of Christian gifting, thinkers like Nietzsche, Derrida, Caputo, and Horner justifiably protest against the mercantilism in Christian gifting. These critics rightly insist that Jesus' *Geniestreich* is his transgression of calculative giving—the transgression of a religiosity that binds (*religare*). Commendably, Horner calls into question this kind of mercantilism: "Much religious mentality is devoted to a calculation of debts."<sup>131</sup>

However, this justified criticism may be recontextualized according to an oscillational thinking of gifting. Despite the legitimate criticisms aimed at Christian commercialism, there is a certain validity in the religious response of return (thanksgiving, indebtedness) towards the co/giver of the creation-gift. There is a long but rather sparse theological tradition of returning (thanking, owing) God for God's creation-gifts. Irenaeus, for instance, determines that the offering of thanks is appropriate for the divine gifting of created things: "Now we make *offering* to Him [God], not as though He stood in need of it, but *rendering thanks* for His gift, and thus sanctifying what has been created."<sup>132</sup> Martin Luther (1483-1546) replaces animal sacrifice with thanksgiving: "we first should offer unto Christ, not oxen or cattle, but ourselves, acknowledging God's gifts, corporal and spiritual, temporal and eternal, and *giving him thanks* for them."<sup>133</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Horner, *RGG*, 247. As I noted above, Marion also calls this kind of religious mercantilism into question when he criticizes Anselm's commercialization of the Incarnation (§ 3.1.1).

<sup>132</sup> Irenaeus, *AH*, Bk. IV, ch. 18, par. 6, in *ANF*, on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-62.htm#P7979\\_2198226](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-01/anf01-62.htm#P7979_2198226)> 1 August 2003; also refer to Irenaeus, *AH*, Bk. V, ch. 2, par. 2.

<sup>133</sup> Martin Luther, "Of A Christian Life," § 706, in *Table Talk*, trans. William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society), on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/1/luther/table\\_talk/table\\_talk32.htm](http://www.ccel.org/1/luther/table_talk/table_talk32.htm)> 1 August 2003. For another example of thanking God for creation-gifts, refer to Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichean*, Bk. 20, § 13, in *PNF*, on *CCEL* <<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-04/npnf1-04-33.htm>> 1 August 2003; also refer to Tertullian, *FB*, Bk. IV, ch. 17, in *ANF*, on *CCEL* <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-31.htm#P5230\\_1636728](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-31.htm#P5230_1636728)> 1 August 2003.

In a homily entitled "The Germination of the Earth," Basil (fifth century) feels obligated by the sheer richness of creation: "In the rich treasures of creation it is difficult to select what is most precious; the loss of what is omitted is too severe . . . What then? Shall we show no *gratitude* for so many beneficial gifts . . .?"<sup>134</sup> The anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* (fourteenth century) advises that we should react to "the wonderful gifts, kindness, and works of God in all His [sic] creatures bodily and ghostly with *thanking and praising*."<sup>135</sup>

To be sure, the gift's circularity is sometimes figured in extremely harsh terms. François Fénelon (1651-1715), for instance, demands that the divine gift be returned: "What do you have which belongs to thee? What do you have which did not come from on high, and ought not to *return* there? Everything, yes, even this I which would divide with God his gifts, is a gift of God, and was only made for Him . . ."<sup>136</sup> The gift loses all gratuity and linearity according to a logic and language of a divine ownership that is never relinquished.

The creation-gift continues to evoke feelings of indebtedness and return today. At one point in *God in Creation*, Moltmann identifies creation as a gift: "the world is God's creation and his gift."<sup>137</sup> How do we respond? "The person who thanks, lays the given and accepted gift before the giver."<sup>138</sup> The creation-gift is returned in thanksgiving. Indeed, "Offering the world to God in *thanksgiving* confers freedom in existence"—though one wonders how the circle of reception-and-return confers freedom.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, Moltmann defines human being in

<sup>134</sup> Basil, "Homily 5," § 4, in PNF, on CCEL <[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-08/Npnf2-08-13.htm#P2236\\_681498](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-08/Npnf2-08-13.htm#P2236_681498)> 1 August 2003.

<sup>135</sup> *Cloud of Unknowing*, ch. 8, on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/a/anonymous2/cloud/htm/xiv.htm>> 18 August 2003.

<sup>136</sup> François Fénelon, *Spiritual Progress*, in *Fénelon and Madame Guyon*, ed. James W. Metcalf (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1853), on CCEL <<http://www.ccel.org/f/fénelon/progress/cache/progress.htm#3>> 1 August 2003.

<sup>137</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, 71.

<sup>138</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, 71.

<sup>139</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, 71, 70. The statement that ties the gift to God is also prefigured by a vocabulary of divine ownership: "this world is the *property* of the gods, not of men and women." *GC*, 71.

precisely the terms of thanksgiver: "To express the experience of creation in *thanksgiving and praise* is his [human being; sic] designation from the very beginning . . ."<sup>140</sup> Webb remarks: "What God gives is both God's self and the givenness of things that allows us to *recognize, multiply, and return* God's gifts."<sup>141</sup>

Theology returns the gift in various degrees of acuteness: thanking, praising, returning. But such responses to the gift, as paradoxical as they are, belong to the very nature of the gift. Debt, binding, and calculation are gathered up under the figure of *identification*—one of the two essential marks of gift/ing: the economic reception of the gift and all that it entails (identification, calculation, a sense of debt, etc.) is therefore an *essential aspect to the reception of the gift*. Religiosity reflects the divinely gift-ed creation-gift's circularity, even though circularity un/does it. This un/doing is essential: the gift would go unrecognized without identification, exchange, or indebtedness. But our receptivity should not end with indebtedness; indeed, it should not end at all: our modes of reception should *oscillate*.

Finally, I am better placed to work through the two all-important questions and the proposition submitted by Caputo at the end of the Villanova exchange: "Should anyone end up in debt from a gift? Should we be in debt to God for the gift of creation? If creation is a gift, then it is not a debt but something we affirm and celebrate." To begin with, should we end up in debt from a gift? Whether we "like it or not," we *do* end up in debt, insofar as we recognize a gift, even in its gratuity, and thereby respond according to different degrees of return. To be sure, any indebtedness should be offset by the recognition that the gift *also releases us from its debt*. Applying this observation to God and creation, the following observation may be offered: *if* God co/gifts creation, then we are, once again, both indebted and released from debt. According to a logic of oscillation, Horner's powerful

<sup>140</sup> Moltmann, *GC*, 70.

<sup>141</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 90; emphasis added. The theologian Stephen J. Duffy, who, as I noted in my Introduction, writes about *grace*, also recalls the idea of return: "Humankind receives the world from the Creator's hands that it might bring it back to God . . ." Duffy, 73. Also consider the following statement that immediately precedes the cited one: "God created the world for God's own glory."

contention, that we "owe God nothing," requires modification: we owe and not-owe God. Unfortunately, Christendom has perhaps focused too much attention on owing divinity.

Now, the interrelated responses of affirmation and celebration certainly exemplify the response of not-owing God. Affirmation is a Yes-saying to the creation-gift (a *very* Nietzschean, anti-mercantile thing to do): it implies a deviation away from the language of economy and negotiation, for affirmation is an act motivated by joy rather than duty. An affirmation of the creation-gift also seems to imply a deviation away from the desire to calculate the gift's worth: freely given creation is (simply) affirmed, rather than circumscribed, instrumentalized, technologized, and commodified.

Celebration is an interesting response because, while it still resonates with religious meaning and is associated with religious events and religion in general (a priest, for example, is often called a "celebrant"), it has certainly gained a more general signification, denoting the act of enjoying.<sup>142</sup> "Celebration" may perhaps be defined as the (often secular) ritualization of affirmation. Celebrating or enjoying the gift is a reception that is non-circular, or, more accurately, *less* circular: rather than repaying or returning the gift, the recipient delights in it. While the celebration-reception is still a reaction to the gift, it certainly resists any heavy-handed gift-return: the gift is "simply" enjoyed without clear recourse to exchange.

One may even propose that which is scandalous to the ethically and religiously zealous: that the more irreligious or secular the celebration, the more respectable the response is, at least in terms of the creation-gift's gratuity. It is worth quoting Caputo's reference to Lévinas in this respect:

<sup>142</sup> The *OED* defines "celebration" thus: "The performance of a solemn ceremony; spec. the action of celebrating the eucharist. The observing of a feast, day, or special season; the honouring or recognizing of an event by religious ceremonies, festivities, etc." The *NODE* offers the following secular characteristic as part of its description; "the action of making one's pleasure at an important event . . . by engaging in enjoyable . . . activity." One of the *Dictionary's* definitions of "celebrate" is: to "do something enjoyable." *NODE*, 293.

Lévinas speaks at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity* of a kind of natural atheism, where you rejoice in the world for its own sake; which, he thinks, has to be interrupted later or at a higher level by the ethical claim. But first there's this sphere of a kind of joyous atheism. It is there that he talks about "good soup." You should be able to enjoy good soup. There needs to be a moment of a kind of felicitous unmindfulness of God in which we take the world that God has given to us without being obsessed with returning it to God.<sup>143</sup>

This sentiment captures precisely that which constitutes a reception of the creation-gift that reflects the gift's aporeticity: a doubled receptivity. On the one hand, the response of indebtedness corresponds to the gift's ability to be identified. Hence, ethical and religious indebtedness is not improper to the reception of the gift. On the other hand, the gift's reception according to the modes of affirmation, celebration, and enjoyment reflect the gratuitous aspect of the gift. Caputo therefore urges us gift-recipients to linger longer on the side of the gift's gratuity and to respond accordingly: affirming, celebrating, and, as I noted in the previous chapter, also forgiving. When speaking about the two aspects of the gift in terms of "pure gift" (gratuity) and "pure economy" (circularity), Caputo advocates the ideal situation as one "of inhabiting the distance between the two with as much grace and ambiance and hospitality as possible," or, in more oscillational terms, "to move between them and have more gracious, open-ended economics."<sup>144</sup>

Certainly a "joyous atheism," which is somehow interrupted by the gift's identification as a gift, is a *very proper* response to the freely given web of what-is. First of all, secularity responds to the anonymity of the gift-giver (proposed by the phenomenological Marion) by not really responding at all. A secular response approaches non-response: the gift is simply enjoyed. Furthermore, secularity dissolves, to a certain degree, the "insoluble debt" that Marion's phenomenology seems to propound, and which Caputo is so wary of (§ 3.2.1-2). After all,

<sup>143</sup> Caputo, personal conversation, 3 December 2001. Refer to Lévinas, *T/II*, 110. Lévinas' profound ethicist discounts Foltz's charge recalled at the beginning of this subsection.

<sup>144</sup> Caputo, *PTJD*, 173; Caputo, personal conversation, 3 December, 2001.

secularization is a resistance to the gift's circularization (calculation, obligation). And, perhaps, this is the case when we go about our everyday business in the midst of the creation-gift: the gift is not recognized as such; it retains its giftness insofar as its linearity is saved by our ignorance.

And so, any return of the gift should be tempered by a secular or atheistic receptivity that is affirmative and celebratory. What this means for the religious is that if the creation-gift is perceived to be gift-ed by God, the gift's reception could be tempered by the marks of *both* indebtedness *and* joyous affirmation. And so, I propose that the way for believers to remain most faithful to the gift-aporia is to oscillate between indebtedness and its other: to owe and not-owe God. *If* one perceives what-is as, in some way, divinely co/gift-ed, then one should oscillate between (religious) Carnival to (secular) carnival.<sup>145</sup> Oscillation would reflect and respect the mad logic of the creation-gift. Perhaps this oscillation, as thorny as it seems, may be the *really* "real *Geniestrich* of Jesus."

I noted in my retracing of the gift in archival theology that, in certain texts, Bunyan stresses the circularity of the gift (§ 2.1.2). However (and in keeping with our entanglement when we attempt to think the gift), in his book *The Work of Jesus Christ As An Advocate*, he advocates the paradoxical two-way action of acknowledging the gift with an unashamed taking—and asking for more: "God has no need of thy gift, nor Christ of thy bribe, to plead thy cause; take *thankfully* what is offered, and *call for more*; that is the best giving to God. God is rich enough; talk not then of giving, but of receiving, for thou art poor. Be not too high, nor think thyself too good to live by the alms of heaven . . ."<sup>146</sup> Thanking (an act of indebtedness) and squandering (reflecting divine excess) are here placed side by

<sup>145</sup> The OED stipulates that "Carnival" (with a capital) refers to: "The season immediately preceding Lent, devoted in Italy and other Roman Catholic countries to revelry and riotous amusement . . ." Of course, the term "carnival" has gained a broader definition: "Any season or course of feasting, riotous revelry, or indulgence. A fun-fair; circus."

<sup>146</sup> Bunyan, *The Work of Jesus Christ as an Advocate*, ch. 8, ed. George Offor (London: Dorman Newman, 1689), on *Acacia John Bunyan Online Library* <<http://acacia.pair.com/Acacia.John.Bunyan/Sermons.Allegories/Jesus.Christ.Advocate/8.html>> 8 August 2003.

side: the gift-recipient gratefully receives gifts *but also* asks for more! The believing gift-recipient would, according to Bunyan's thinking, be a grateful squanderer.<sup>147</sup>

And so, if creation is a gift, religious return should oscillate with a quasi-Nietzschean squandering. The critique of religion as exemplar of return and indebtedness, a critique that is undeniably valid and crucial, should be considered in the larger context of the gift-aporia: while the gratuity of the gift has certainly been underplayed and the notion of indebtedness overemphasized, any simple reversal or one-sidedness would not sufficiently reflect the aporeticity of the gift. A secular enjoyment (affirmation, celebration) of the gift should certainly be emphasized, but indebtedness (religious or otherwise) remains a proper response to the gift. A secular joy responds to the gift's gratuity; a religious indebtedness reflects the gift's circularity. The gift-aporia makes room for both of these kinds of responses; it makes room for oscillation.

#### An Ardor For Arduous Oscillation

And so, the subject that interprets creation as a gift-aporia would receive-and-return this gift in an oscillation marked by ecologically nuanced responses like letting-be, use, enjoyment, and return. All of these responses, as divergent as they are, respect and reflect the gift-aporia.

Now, one may protest that the double movement of oscillation is difficult. In the previous chapter, I discussed Webb's apparent objection that "the oscillation between excess and exchange produces theories of gifting that make gift giving an increasingly difficult activity to understand, let alone practice." I concur. *However*, I argue that this undoubtedly difficult oscillation is evoked *by* the gift-aporia *itself*. If

<sup>147</sup> Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911), who offers more reflections on the other-than-graced gift than most theologians before her, also urges thanking-and-taking: "And where a thing is a gift, the only course left for the receiver is to take it and thank the giver." Smith, *The Christian Secret of a Happy Life*, ch. 4 ("How to Enter In"), on CCEL <[http://www.ccel.org/s/smith\\_hw/secret/secret07.htm](http://www.ccel.org/s/smith_hw/secret/secret07.htm)> 1 August 2003; also refer to Smith's identification of a correlation between the gift and faith in *The God of All Comfort*, ch. 12, "A Word to the Wavering Ones," on CCEL <[http://www.ccel.org/s/smith\\_hw/comfort/cache/comfort.html3](http://www.ccel.org/s/smith_hw/comfort/cache/comfort.html3)> 6 August 2003.

this is the case, then our thinking of gifting will be necessarily "difficult"—and even perplexing, maddening—if we are to remain faithful to the gift. Concomitantly, an oscillational *practice* of gifting (of giving and receiving the gift) dizzies us, but such is the effect of the gift, and it should be embraced if we are to remain committed to it.

Another passage from *The Gifting God*, when re-read in a positive light, also illuminates a thinking of an oscillational praxis: "Excess and reciprocity are the two weights between which the discourse on giving uncertainly seesaws, seemingly incapable of finding the right balance. If I am right, then any discourse on giving wobbles at the moment it tries to do justice to both of these opposing positions."<sup>148</sup> Interestingly, oscillation is close to wobbling: like wobbling, oscillation never ceases; it never secures itself by allowing one gift-element to dominate, silence, or collapse itself into the other.

As for finding "the right balance," this is certainly the crux of the present difficulty: as I have underlined in this chapter, the active agent certainly needs to emphasize those responses and reactions that superbly reflect the excess or gratuity of the creation-gift (including silence, letting-be, and enjoyment), for there is always the risk of responding to the gift exclusively in terms of obligation or return, which would reduce the gift to a commodity. However, oscillation guards against bias, and this is certainly challenging, since we (moderns) are (now) asked to constantly, arduously move in two diverging directions. But the difficulty of this double movement does not entail its rejection. Moreover, what is at stake here, the well-being of creation itself, now *depends upon* humanity's proper interaction with it. And so, the *arduous* task of *oiko*/theo/logical oscillation requires *ardor*—for creation's sake.

<sup>148</sup> Webb, *TGG*, 31.

## CONCLUSION

And so, what if what-is is a gift?

In order to broach this question, it is necessary to work through the question that comes before it: what is a gift? As Derrida makes plain in *Given Time*, a gift is essentially an aporia. But what is an aporia? It may be described topographically: it is a place without passage. The rethinking of gifting undertaken here generates the following possibility: that there may be *two ways* forward when it comes to the gift-aporia and its aspects of freedom (*gratuity, linearity, excess*) and identification (*knowledge, circularity, exchange*). What if one's interaction with the gift involves a movement (i.e., acceptance) *and* a counter-movement (i.e., return)? Since the gift is contradictory (*linear and circular*), an oscillation between its two conditions would respect and reflect its contradictoriness: on the one hand, the various grades or modes of reciprocity (*indebtedness, return*) reflect its mark of identifiability; on the other hand, various grades or modes of receptivity (*affirmation, celebration*) reflect the gift's gratuity.

While the Bible gathers together a multivalent array of gifts (from enticements to grace), archival theology rarely refers to the gift's two-way interactivity, and, even during these moments, does not probe its aporeticity (§ 2.1). In its attempt to think the gift, twentieth century theology is caught up in the gift's tensile topography, without incisively articulating the necessity and legitimacy of our entanglement (§ 2.2). Even Marion's brilliant philosophical treatment of the gift, which seeks to purify it of its circularity (and releases us from a certain entanglement), does not escape the double movement of squandering and indebtedness (§ 3.1). Drawing on various aspects of the work of key thinkers considered in this study (Derrida, Marion, Caputo, Webb, Schmitz), I therefore propose that ceaseless oscillation would faithfully respect and reflect the gift's paradoxicality (§ 3.2).

Armed with hard-working oscillation, one is able to engage the question and possibility of creation as a gift. If what-is is a gift, then its aporeticity requires the

double movement of acceptance and return. To begin with, one should acknowledge that the gift's excess exceeds the active agent who interacts with it. According to this excess, the phenomena of silence and "tremblings" (such as wonder) are recognized as ways of inspiring ecological sensibilities (§ 4.2.1). From the perspective of the conscious gift-recipient, the responses of letting-be, instrumentality, enjoyment, and return are figured according to the logic and language of oscillation (§ 4.2.2). Such responses, which mirror the aporeticity of the gift, constitute the double movement of the aporia's reception, and thereby find a home in the topography of the creation-gift-aporia.

But most importantly: to be overcome and to tremble; to be silent and to let-be; to take and to enjoy; and also to gratefully return: such interactions imply a *loving* relation. If creation is a gift—perhaps co/gift-ed by a loving God—then, in a word, it should be *loved*.

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