

If Creation is a Gift:

From Derrida to the Earth (An Introduction)

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In the late 1990s I was introduced to Continental philosophy. I was particularly drawn to Jacques Derrida's thoughts on the gift.¹ As many of you will know, Derrida's *Given Time* (published in English in 1992) scandalously problematized one of our most treasured and – one would think – straightforward phenomena: gift-giving.² For those of you unfamiliar with this argument, it goes something like this: the gift is a problem or aporia because, while it is ordinarily understood as that which is given gratuitously (without condition), there is nevertheless always an exchange of some kind, ranging from responses like gratitude, thanksgiving, counter-gifting, indebtedness, and so on.

Exchange marks all three aspects of gift/ing: giver, gift, and recipient. To begin with, the giver receives something in return: be it another gift, gratitude, self-congratulation, or even hostility – for even displeasure or rejection gives back to the gift-giver their identity.³ The gift-thing itself likewise does not escape exchange economy.⁴ Whether it is a thing, an intention, a value, or a symbol, it is nevertheless *identified* as a gift and this recognition brings it into the circle of reciprocity. If the gift is not identified as such, then it would perhaps elude the circle – remain *aneconomic* – but then it would no longer be phenomenally recognized as such. Derrida muses: "There must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or dis-

order, and there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must – miraculously, graciously – agree with each other.”⁵ 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 obligation. An aporia, indeed.

Now, one may object that gift-giving creates *bonds* rather than *obligations* – which is what writers like Marcel Mauss and Lewis Hyde promote in light of observations based on some other-than-western cultures.⁶ But even this “softer” kind of circularity is still a figure of exchange: a bond involves exchange or the expectation of exchange. (One may note that, for western capitalism, “bond” also denotes an interest-bearing investment.) While bonding may not be as binding as the gift-giving which typifies contemporary (western) culture, any kind of bond-producing gifting nevertheless seems to contrast with the radical gratuity we normally associate with “the gift.” To bond and to bind: they differ in terms of the degree of burden and expectation, but they remain bound to the relationality that inevitably and problematically gives rise to it.

But what if gifting is generative or spiral-like rather than closed – akin to the notion of “paying a gift forward”? Rather than returning the gift or favor, the gift-recipient gifts to others in a process which is more exponentially disseminative rather than calculatively reciprocal. (See Catherine Ryan Hyde’s book *Pay It Forward* as a wonderful elucidation of this kind of gifting.)⁷ But even when gifting is generative rather than a closed/closing loop, the aporia remains: the gift is still marked by obligation or expectation (the obligation to pay forward) – even though this is certainly a less/non-onerous gifting.

And so, the gift-aporia remains. Giving credit where credit’s due, I would propose that Derrida’s originality lies not so much with a “discovery” of the irreducible duality marking the gift, but with his rigorous philosophical articulation of what, I suspect, many of us have known (or intuited) all along: that the gift is not so “pure” or unconditional, or, perhaps more accurately, that it is both pure and impure, conditional and unconditional, linear and reciprocal. Expectation and exchange, on the one hand, coincide with autonomy and gratuity, on the other. As annoying as it may sound to minds bred on the logic of the either/or (Aristotle lives on), the gift evidently appears to be an irresolvable paradox or aporia constituted by two irreducibly contradictory or heterogeneous elements or sets of elements.

Now, during my honours year, one of the subjects I took was called “Ecology, Gender, and the Sacred” (run by Kate Rigby and Constant Mews). If my introduction to Continental theory involved a Copernican re-evaluation of my thinking (brought up, as I was, on analytic philosophy),

then my introduction to ecology can only be described as a *revelation*: ecology's truth appears obvious to me now, but green theory opened my eyes, lifting them up from the page to the world (to echo Yves Bonnefoy's wonderful phrase).⁸ My introduction to ecology was, in fact, an introduction to the Earth. I say "introduction" rather than "*re*-introduction" or "*re*-turn" because, as a Westerner raised on neoplatonic, otherworldly andro-anthropocentrism, to think of the other-than-human was radically foreign to me – and not only me: after all, the ecological crisis amply proves our corporate ignorance, indifference, and hostility towards creation. The Earth is a foreign country.

My introduction to ecology – particularly ecological feminism – was challenging not only because it forced me to confront my own corporeality-denying anthropocentrism, but because these prejudices and blind spots substantially mark poststructuralism (please note the qualifier "substantially"). While ecologists' criticisms towards radical philosophy can often be caricaturish, wayward, and unjustified, this kind of charge certainly has some force, enough force to make one wonder whether – and to what extent – Continental thought is or may be able to disturb and correct our anti-ecological thoughts and ways, and thereby help save the Earth. To the question "How Green is Pomo Theory?" one must unfortunately answer "Not Very!" After all, can one really describe Derrida, Foucault, Lévinas, Lacan, etc., as *ecological* thinkers? This, then, was a worry for me.

On the other hand, while Continental thought has generally suffered from a lack of ecological awareness, green theory itself is not without its problems, like the essentialisms and holisms that risk erasing otherness and difference. The question therefore arose: could radical philosophy be a kind of corrective in some respects? Furthermore, I began to wonder whether and how postmodern theory and green theory could inform each other. In the midst of this contemplative context, the idea arose – or was gift-ed to me – that the insights of these discourses could critically guide each other when considering or re-considering a very entrenched, widespread notion: the notion of *creation as a gift*. This popular notion explicitly brings together these two streams of thought. Of course, a third current is implicated in this maxim: "creation as a gift" resounds theologically. And so, I had myself a subject-matter that would introduce to each other the somewhat disparate, challenging discourses of radical theory, ecology, and, to a lesser extent, theology and ecological theology.

A first step to thinking-through the possibility of creation's giftiness was to emphasize that this notion is exactly that: a *possibility* that could also be an actuality. Hence, I eventually titled my work "If Creation is a Gift" and introduced it with a discourse on the proposition's "ifness": the "If" signals the

suppositional, hermeneutical, undecidable nature of the proposition. There is therefore no pretension here that creation's giftness is a certified fact but something that *may* be the case. While we know that the cosmos is a given, we cannot know whether it is also a gift – all the while recognizing or remembering that the proposition's status as a possibility and as an interpretation of what-is is by no means inferior in any sense. (Any imposition of inferiority would be generated by the longstanding and unjustified privileging of actuality over possibility, of decision over undecidability, of knowledge over faith, and so on.)⁹

Now, the next task was to define the term "creation" and it was defined in its broadest sense: the continually creative, open-ended matrix of material entities in their interrelatedness and individuation. Before elucidating the most immediately relevant and challenging aspect of this straightforwardly ecological definition of what-is, it is important to offer the caveat that my focus lies with creation itself rather than considering the related and immediately generated question of who/what gifts creation, for when a gift is given one assumes a giver or givers. Straightaway, we must insist that the identity of the gift-giver/s is also marked by a certain undecidability: we do not know who/what gifts creation (*if*, indeed, creation is a gift). What we can say with some certainty is that creation creates: the matrix *poieticizes* (brings-forth or comes-into-presence), and even *autopoieticizes* (self-brings-forth), but we cannot know whether and how this creativity is related to the possibility of gifting.

By suspending the question of the who/what, the issue of creation's giftness is opened up to a wider audience: whether we be believers, unbelievers, or in-betweeners, what is immediately pertinent is whether we figure creation itself as a gift: since the primary concern here is the gift's *what* (Earth) rather than its *how* (God/chaos/Earth itself/etc.), then this hermeneutic investigation becomes accessible to a wide range of ideological positions. All that is required in order for this line of thinking to be productive is the acceptance of (or even openness towards) the possibility that creation may be a gift.

A final consideration must be elucidated regarding our definition of creation and its pairing with giftness: by proposing that creation is the continually creative, open-ended matrix of material entities in their interrelatedness and individuation, then we come to the surprising and confronting position that giftness would mark each and every being – including humanly manufactured things. Straightaway, we recognize that our all-encompassing definition and its pairing with the gift thereby exceeds distinctions like nature/culture or *phusis/techne*. Giftness is shared by all things-in-relation, transcending determinations like "natural" and "humanly

made.” This appears strange and challenging: while we may consider things like our lives, friendships, majestic mountains, and beautiful sunsets as gifts, who would ordinarily consider mundane (*mundanus*) or banal humanly constructed things like chairs or ashtrays as gifts?

Indeed, this radically eco-egalitarian proposition (that *all* material things are gifts) immediately raises an important objection: if all things are considered gifts, and if we assume that a gift is somehow intrinsically “good,” then how can destructive things, like bombs that kill and industrially-technologically generated pollution that disfigures the Earth, be considered gifts? Briefly, to propose that a thing is a gift does not mean that a thing is *exclusively* reducible to its giftness: a thing may be a gift but it may *also* be more than and otherwise than a gift. While giftness may be a kind of common denominator, it does not thereby erase or cancel other determinations of a thing: its giftness is *but one* of its many possible and/or actual aspects (e.g., its givenness, beingness, objectness, etc.). My contention is that humanly produced entities (as well as humans themselves) are gifts – but gifts that *also* disfigure and/or destroy other gifts. The gift’s duality in this respect is reflected in its etymology: the Greek, *dosis*, of which “dose” is derived, can mean a present, a poison, or a cure; and in German, *Gift* means “poison.”¹⁰

As strange as it sounds, what is crucial to note here is that gifts like plastics and bombs are composed of mysterious, miraculous matter (and one can recall here thinkers from Pascal to ecologist Freya Mathews), but these things’ destructive elements derive from a complex matrix of human calculation, intervention, construction, and operation.¹¹

In other words, an entity can only be construed as a non-gift if it is measured according to the limited category of its human conception, transformation, and deployment. A bomb-thing, for example, would be a bomb and nothing else/more! The thing’s irreducible mystery or excess is ignored according to such a perspective, which is, admittedly, the dominant and domineering perspective of instrumentalizing anthropocentrism. This kind of narrow-mindedness is one of hyper-humanism’s crowning “achievements”: a thing is construed exclusively as a utensil! Our narrow mindset would account for the irritation or hostility that a radical eco-democratism may incite, for it challenges the prevailing view. Indeed, the prevailing view is so ingrained that calls for a truly ecological egalitarianism even seem “counter-intuitive.”

Of course, I am not suggesting that we continue on the current path of designing and manufacturing bombs or Styrofoam cups: what is being proposed and stressed is that *all* matter – even when it is manipulated by violent, polluting humans – is marked by giftness. In sum, we should acknowl-

edge that gift-things are multi-faceted: while a thing is a gift at least in terms of its materiality, it can *also* be destructive according to its human intention, production, and operation.

Having defined our basic terms (“if,” “creation,” “gift”), I then proceeded to investigate the ways in which “gift” has been configured biblically, theologically, and philosophically, measuring whether and to what extent these configurations disclose and dissect the gift’s radical heterogeneity. To begin with, the Bible proves to be an outstanding literary site disclosing the aporetic structure of the gift in all its dumbfounding doublesidedness. *Young’s Analytical Concordance* identifies twenty-one variant meanings, ranging from “reward” to “offering” to “bribe” to the “free gift” or “grace.”¹² The First Testament is replete with many instances where the gift is anything but gratuitous, but one of my favorites is when Ezekiel links the act 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” (Ezekiel 16.33). To be sure, conditional gifts are not limited to the First Testament (e.g., Philippians 4.17-18).¹³ As Derrida himself has noted, this kind of heavily circular gifting – gifting with “strings attached” – aptly reflects the binding nature of religion (*religare*, to bind).¹⁴

Now, such blatant conditionality is strikingly contradictory for those of us – perhaps all of us? – who identify the gift in its gratuity. But it is Scripture itself that announces – perhaps even inaugurates? – the unconditional gift. Even the debt-laden First Testament signals this kind of donation: for example, at Esther 2.18 we are told that King Ahasuerus “gave gifts with royal liberality” to his people upon his marriage to Esther, and this liberality signals a gifting unmotivated or less motivated by a logic of circularity. A second text is more telling: Ecclesiastes 5.18-19 wisely (and somewhat hedonistically?) urges us to enjoy the gift of life.¹⁵ In this instance, and whether the Ecclesiastician intentionally realizes it or not, the gift’s gratuity is reflected in the wise call to enjoy it rather than return it or feel obliged by it. The gift’s strings, in this instance, are denied, obscured, or complicated by the delight the gift evokes.

I return to the question of enjoyment as a response to the gift in due course, but what is presently worth noting is that these rather rare First-Testamental moments indicate a more gracious gifting – a giving without condition. Of course, the spontaneity of the gift emerges most clearly in the Second Testament with its repeated references to grace. Grace is, after all, the unconditional, unilateral gift par excellence, freely given by a God to purportedly undeserving creatures. In Ephesians 2.8-9, Paul declares: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is *not your own do-*

ing; it is the gift from God – *not the result from works*, so that no one may boast.” Here the gift is not tied to the receiver’s enterprise. This gift is not involved in exchange economy or tied up in cause-and-effect. The grace-gift is given just for the hell of it.

However, we shouldn’t be too hasty in adjudging and admiring grace as a pure and simple gift, for it too does not elude the gift’s doublebindedness. Statements pertaining to this exemplary unconditional gift nevertheless disclose the gift’s entanglement in circularity, thereby adding credence to (or perhaps inaugurally indicating?) the gift’s doublehandedness. For instance, the Christic logic in Luke’s Gospel, on the one hand, 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 [gift], expecting nothing in return” (Luke 6.35a).¹⁶ Nevertheless, this subversive logic immediately reverts to an economic rationale, for this kind of giving nevertheless earns divine credit: “Your reward will be great” (Luke 6.35b). Here, the two logics (gratuity and reward) appear side by side – aporetically. Of course, let us not ignore the radicality of “expecting nothing in return,” considering that the logic of expectation governs the First Testament and its culture/s (a logic which also governs contemporary society, which is all about calculations and expectations of returns).¹⁷ And so, despite the reversion to calculation, one nevertheless glimpses the subversive logic of unidirectional gifting, which is also evidenced in the call for countless forgiving (Matthew 18.21-22).¹⁸ Perhaps my favorite instance of the entanglement of gratuity and circularity occurs at 1 Corinthians 9.15 when Paul exclaims: “Thanks be to God for [God’s] indescribable gift!” Paul offers thanksgiving for a gift that nevertheless exceeds or eludes return.

The next part of my study involved locating and examining ways in which theologians have broached the question of the gift-aporia. A first discovery was that, prior to the twentieth century, there appears to be a lack of any sustained attention paid to this question. In other words, the gift’s doublesidedness went unchecked – a situation all the more fascinating and perplexing because, as I have just relayed, the gift’s heterogeneous character is starkly exposed in the Bible and also because grace has been such a massive theological pre-occupation. (One could even think of theology as an attempt to reconcile grace and reciprocation.)

In the twentieth century, the situation regarding the inadequate treatment of the question of the gift changed. The books I analyzed included Kenneth Schmitz’s *The Gift: Creation* (published in 1982); Jean-Luc Marion’s *God Without Being* (published in French in the same year), and Stephen Webb’s *The Gifting God* (released in 1996). As you may note, the

first two texts were written before the publication of Derrida's *Given Time*: they are therefore more prone to entanglement in the tension between excess and exchange, but even Webb's book – which acknowledges Derrida's contribution – struggles with the paradox.¹⁹ And so, my analysis, guided by an acknowledgment and affirmation of the gift's aporeticity, essentially consisted in locating these texts' moments of entanglement.

Now, as part of my retracing of the ways in which the gift-aporia has been thought or unthought, I also critiqued Marion's phenomenological refiguration. Indeed, Marion rethought the gift in the wake of Derrida's provocative treatment. For those of you unfamiliar with Marion's rethinking, what he basically (and brilliantly) does is think the gift without or beyond causality, beyond the everyday understanding of gifting as a metaphysical chain of giver-gift-recipient: gifting can occur without an identifiable giver or gift or recipient. Marion's phenomenological treatment is powerful, but while he appears to evade causality – a noble evasion when the gift burdens – his account nevertheless retains the notion of indebtedness (which is an exemplary figure of the circle). Indeed, Marion goes so far as to suggest that the self is preceded by and defined by this indebtedness.²⁰ Alas, we are back to square one: Marion's postmetaphysical rendering ends up retaining the gift's gratitude and circularity, thereby retaining its aporeticity.

How critical should we be of such entanglements? First of all, the gift-aporia (like any paradox) can undo the best of thinkers. Even Derrida himself – the thinker par excellence of this conundrum – declared, during an exchange with Marion in 1997, that he is “ready to give up the word [gift]. Since this word is finally so contradictory.”²¹ Whether this is just an instance of French melodramatics, or exasperation, or who-know-what (we can only go by the letter of the text), Derrida himself is ready to give up on the gift because it's just too damn aporetic!

We therefore sympathize with those who have considered the gift and become unintentionally entangled in it, who want to unchain it from causality, or who want to abandon it, but our sympathy shouldn't be absolute, particularly when the urges to give it up or phenomenologically refigure it relate to disengaging the gift's circular element (gratitude, debt, obligation, reciprocity). Why shouldn't we be too sympathetic in these cases – indeed, why should we be somewhat critical? Apart from the nobility in desiring sheer gratuity (some of us yearn for a less calculating, more forgiving humanity), any ambition to disengage this element is problematic on at least two counts. As noted from the beginning, on a theoretical level, the gift itself requires identification in order to be a gift, so its figures of circularity are constitutive of it. The gift is an aporia precisely because of the commerce that marks it. (Of course, the gift's identification can lead to dubious things like a

burdensome obligation.) Now, there is also another profoundly positive aspect to the retention of the element of exchange: this element signals the relationality of the gift and of gifting. This translates ecologically: since we are beings-in-relation, gifting will always involve “strings attached.” To have “strings attached”: this is precisely what it means to be corporeal. Hence, a denial of the gift’s economistic aspect – signaled by things like binding and bonding – may be understood as a denial of relationality, of a flight from this matrix with its requisite responses and responsibilities.²²

One may draw on an essay by ecotheologian Marion Grau to elucidate the necessity of recalling and even promoting the gift’s element of identification-relation. In her essay “Erasing ‘Economy,’” Grau traces the way in which, over time, Derrida’s thought on the gift has “taken on remarkably different shapes.”²³ She argues that the early Derrida does not choose between general (excessive) and restricted (exchange) economies, but rather negotiates the two. On the other hand, the Villanovian Derrida (together with Marion) displays a dubious desire for purity; Grau ponders: “Derrida’s attempts to isolate the gift from all polluting economy appear restrictive, if not almost oppressive, in what seems a drive for purity and transcendence” and “We might wonder whether the gift, given without return and reciprocity, truly represents a desirable alternative to [exchange] economy.”²⁴ This line of questioning provides a second crucial eco-political reason for the conservation of the gift’s tension: *if* we apply the concept and phenomenon of “gift” to corporeal things, that is, if we consider the matrix of material beings as gift/s, then the preservation of the element of identification (circularity, exchange) reflects and promotes the reality of relationality (reciprocity, interdependency). In other words, if excess signifies things like linearity and singularity, then exchange denotes – and reminds us of – our interrelatedness and interindebtedness. If thinkers devote too much time on excess or individuation, there is a danger that the element of our radical interconnect-edness is ignored, marginalized, devalued, or forgotten.

That is why, in response to Derrida’s desire for the pure or non-reciprocal gift, Grau questions its eco-political resonance: “Is an ‘untied’ gift in any way salvific for our relations? Exploitative economies have often depended upon the nonreciprocity of women or slaves to be the willingly or unwillingly ‘gifting’ contributors ... so that those in power could convert this symbolic capital that came to them as a ‘gift’ that could be converted into realized capital owned by those in power. Is not part of the problem in economies that they have not respected enough the need for a somewhat balanced reciprocity, that women, slaves, creation, environment have been excluded from a truly reciprocal and inclusive economy?”²⁵

Hence, in order to redress and restrict this drive towards the pure or

absolute, thinking the two elements of the gift together ensures that the element of circularity opens up the re-integration of relation and reciprocity as crucial and undeniable – a re-integration which is all the more vital in an age of unparalleled ecological devastation. We should therefore think the gift's relationality and reciprocity – and not just excess and gratuity – for creation's sake.

And so, any radical suspension or denial of the gift's aspect of identifiability appears to be an *excessive* move – both theoretically and ecopolitically – which means that remaining faithful to its contradictory duality is warranted on both counts. Furthermore – and somewhat surprisingly – this tension actually provides an *opening* for action (as I explain in a moment), particularly when it comes to figuring and encountering the Earth as a gift-aporia (if it is one).

Now, before I offer a few thoughts regarding responses by intentional agents that would be informed by this tension, it is important to note how the creation-gift's excess precedes and overcomes us. In other words, the creation-gift precedes and exceeds the gift-recipient. This precedence and overwhelmingness may be expressed by phenomena like astonishment and wonder.²⁶ One of the most ecologically significant things about these kinds of pre-subjective "reactions" is that they are *very* ecological: by definition, this passivity allows the world to be (gift), rather than being mastered, controlled, commodified, and disfigured by us humans. If anything, we gift-recipients are, in a sense, acted upon *by* the creation-gift – in the most wonderful (and sometimes challenging ways) – rather than acting upon *it* in often disfigurative and destructive ways.

Of course, we must also consider how we, as intentional agents, do and should respond to the creation-gift in modes that respect and reflect this irreducible heterogeneity, and it is in this respect that a radical gift hermeneutics can also be a kind of ethico-politics. So, how can the double-sidedness of the Earth-gift inform our conscious interactivity with it? After all, one would expect a kind of "paralysis" rather than an opening when faced with the gift's double-bind (excess/exchange). So, how to get out of this bind? Paradoxically, a solution lies not so much with finding a way *out* of the aporia but by moving *within* it. But what kind of movement is one which is nevertheless seized?

Oscillation represents this kind of paradoxical movement, characterized as it is by a rotating action that is nevertheless steadfast; 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."²⁷ Unceasing alternation saves the

gift's irresolvable – and, as I explain shortly, ecologically *productive* – tension, reflecting and preserving its giftness, rather than becoming fixed by one of its elements (fixation thereby limiting it to the limits of grace or commerce). Oscillation's both/and thereby guards against exclusion and reification. It does not bias: it is a double movement that does not favor one of the elements at the exclusion of the other, for any exclusion dissolves the gift itself. Rather than taking sides, oscillation takes both sides. Note, too, the phrase "held in succession": this movement is marked by a recognition that gifting and its negotiation occur over time. Temporality is thereby respected; like gifting, oscillation takes time.

Hence, the gift-aporia requires recognition of its duality and a corresponding oscillationality. To be sure, distinguishing between the gift's elements of gratuity and gratitude should be distinguished from any severe dualism in which one aspect dominates and denigrates the other: oscillation guards against any kind of hierarchical dualism. But does this distinction, which preserves the gift's heterogeneity, mean that we should purely and simply oppose or exclude any idea of the gift's unity? Certainly not: while the gift is divided by the heterogeneity internal to it, it is nevertheless a unity; it is a divided unity – or a united division. The gift is paradoxical or contradictory precisely because of the interplay between the excess and exchange that unite and divide it. If the gift were exclusively gratuitous, excluding any kind of identification or reciprocity (if it were, for instance, something like "indescribable grace"), then there would be nothing aporetic about it – baffling (or impossible) for thought and perception, perhaps, but not aporetic. Alternatively, if the gift were exclusively circular, then it would no longer be "gift" but a commodity. But the (creation-)gift is neither indescribable grace nor calculable trade. The "gift," as it occurs on the plane of lived experience, is a unity (or division) that is nevertheless divided (or united) in its heterogeneity. Both/and.

And so, something like an oscillating interactivity with the world (which includes ourselves, other humans, non-human others, and humanly manufactured things) is one that would properly reflect and respond to the creation-gift-aporia. An acknowledgment of the world-gift's aporeticity would make room for a variety of competing responses, and since this interactivity would be governed by the maintenance of the gift-tension, it would disrupt and inform the more ecologically problematic aspects of these responses. In other words, there is something of the ethical and disciplined involved in a vacillating responsiveness, each element informing and restricting the other. How so? Some of the fundamental intentional responses reflecting and respecting the gift's paradoxicality include letting-be, playing-with, utilization, and reciprocity.²⁸

To begin with, I noted above the pre-conscious reaction of letting-be, but it can also be a response – or, more accurately, a response-without-response – from the intentional subject. This exemplary reception allows the gift to appear and be as gift. In its recognition of the gift's circularity, letting-be is akin to "returning" it – although, in this context, there is nothing insulting about such an act, for it saves the gift from responses that are disfigurative and destructive. By letting it be, we allow creation to "grow old," as Mathews wonderfully puts it, rather than exhausting it and polluting it.²⁹ Letting-be is radically non-interventionist. It is, without a doubt, the most ecological response. It disrupts the more problematic aspects of alternative reactions (discussed below). There should, of course, be *way much more* passivity towards the Earth. However, we are reminded that the gift warrants a heterogeneous receptivity – not to mention the fact that, as corporeal-beings-in-relation, an active passivity could not possibly be our one and only response. We are bound to also not-let-the-world-be. But an oscillational logic reminds us that our interaction be tempered by a certain passivity – a passivity which is not a negation but a kind of mediation of human agency – that allows the world to go on being (gift).

A second key reaction is joyous interactivity, whereby the gift is not treated non-interventionally or instrumentally, but where the "object" or "end" of the interaction is play. The "objective" is rather purposeless – a terribly threatening thing for us rational-instrumental-managerial capitalists and socialists still overcoming our neoplatonic asceticism and puritanism. A playful response responds to the gratuity of the gift: take it, have fun! Of course, recreational interactivity with creation can – and often is – excessively unecological. (The ever-expanding "snowfields" come to mind.) Hence, this response may become gentler by staying in tension with letting-be and other circular-reflecting reactions.

Having referred to evidently eco-noble receptions and interactions like letting-be and play, one may expect well-meaning ecologists to be offended by the allowance of an instrumental use of the creation-gift. However, staying true to the gift's aporeticity, responding in an instrumental way reflects the gift's gratuity: it is there for the taking. Nevertheless, when it appears in extreme forms like hyper-commodification and hyper-consumption, there is an utter lack of acknowledgment of gratuity's other – circularity. As an aporia, the gift makes room for an instrumentality that would also make room for competing practices, thereby restricting an ecologically devastating instrumentalism like techno-consumerism. In a severely capitalized world, however, the opposite is true: almost everything is figured instrumentally almost all of the time.

Now, a fourth category of responses is that of exchange or reciprocity

(which incorporates a variety of reactions, such as thanksgiving, indebtedness, and paying-back). Even though we lovers of gratuity (including Derrida, Marion et al) love to privilege the freedom of the gift, we have already discerned why its circularity should be respected – but it bears repeating: it not only lets the gift be, but it counteracts any responses evoked by the element of gratuity which can easily slide to a squandering or wastefulness which reaches its zenith with hyper-capitalism. An acknowledgment of the gift's circularity prompts us to redress any receptivity informed by a misplaced (but often well-meaning) emphasis on the gift's graciousness. When we respond to creation – or when we *will* respond to it – with more reciprocity, gratitude, and thanksgiving, it is more likely the Earth-gift will be treated more gently.

And so, if creation is a gift – a gift in all its splendid aporeticity – then it would inspire and inform an oscillational interactivity with it, which may save it. And, if another name for an interactivity marked by letting-be, utility, enjoyment, and reciprocity is “love,” then, in a word, the Earth should be *loved*.

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NOTES

¹ This essay is an edited version of a seminar of the same name conducted at Monash University's Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies on 22 September 2004, which was itself drawn from my doctoral dissertation, “If Creation is a Gift: Towards an Eco/theo/logical Aporetics”, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, 2003 [henceforth Manolopoulos, “If Creation is a Gift”]. I would like to thank Freya Mathews for her valuable comments and suggestions with regard to the present article. The essay is dedicated to Chris Voukidis (b. 1972), patron saint of struggling poet-philosophers.

² See Derrida, *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) [henceforth Derrida, *Given Time*].

³ See Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 13.

⁴ 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.” See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Vol. 1, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

⁵ Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 123.

- ⁶ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990); W. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Random House, 1983). For a critique of these works, see Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), pp. 12-16 [henceforth Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*].
- ⁷ Catherine Ryan Hyde, *Pay It Forward: A Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999); also see the film version, *Pay It Forward*, dir. Mimi Leder (United States: Warner Brothers, 2000).
- ⁸ Yves Bonnefoy, "Lifting Our Eyes from the Page", *Critical Inquiry* 16.4 (Summer 1990): 794-806.
- ⁹ Two texts that brilliantly examine the significance of undecidability in philosophico-theological contexts are John D. Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and Robyn Horner's *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) [henceforth Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*]. Also see Mark Manolopoulos, "When Marion's Theology Seeks Certainty", *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 4.1 (December 2002) <<http://www.jcrt.org/archives/04.1/Manolopoulos.shtml>> accessed 4 August 2003.
- ¹⁰ Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*, pp. 9-11; also see Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 81. The Greek *dorodokeo* means "to accept as a present, to take as a bribe." Liddell and Scott, *A Lexicon*, 187. Also see Émile Benveniste, "Gift and Exchange in the Indo-European Vocabulary", *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 33-42.
- ¹¹ In different ways, both Pascal and Mathews bring to our attention the inner infinity and mystery of things (i.e., one cannot get to the bottom of things); see Pascal's *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995), e.g., pp. 60-61, and Mathews' "The Soul of Things", *Terra Nova: Nature and Culture* 1.4 (Fall 1996): 55-64, p. 56.
- ¹² Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 390.
- ¹³ Philippians 4.17-18: "Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. 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."
- ¹⁴ See Derrida, *Given Time*, p. 137.
- ¹⁵ Ecclesiastes 5.18-19: "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."
- ¹⁶ 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, p. 74.
- ¹⁷ J. A. 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 cer-

tain conditions that the latter is demanded as a right." Selbie, "Gift", *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958) pp. 172-173, p. 173. (As I noted above, this prevalence is not assumed here to be an exclusively "Eastern" phenomenon.)

¹⁸ Chapter nine of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians also bespeaks the gift's paradoxicality; 2 Corinthians 9.5-7 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*. 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*." (emphases added) This particular passage on the gift is marked by a command, a calculation, and a reward. Despite Paul's plea for freeing up the gift, he encourages a now-classic economic formula: *reaping what is sown*.

¹⁹ See Manolopoulos, "If Creation is a Gift", Ch. 2.

²⁰ See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 98.

²¹ Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney", *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 54-78, p. 67.

²² See Marion Grau, "Erasing 'Economy': Derrida and the Construction of Divine Economies", *CrossCurrents* 52.3 (Fall 2002): 360-370 [henceforth Grau, "Erasing 'Economy'"].

²³ Grau, "Erasing 'Economy'", p. 361

²⁴ Grau, "Erasing 'Economy,'" p. 365.

²⁵ Grau, "Erasing 'Economy'", p. 368.

²⁶ Cf. Manolopoulos, "If Creation is a Gift", Ch. 4.

²⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, incl. 2nd ed. 1989, ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), and 3rd ed., ed. John Simpson, Oxford University Press (in progress since 2000), home page <<http://dictionary.oed.com>> accessed 6 August 2003.

²⁸ For a detailed discussion of these responses, cf. Manolopoulos, "If Creation is a Gift", Ch. 4.

²⁹ Freya Mathews, "Letting the World Grow Old: An Ethos of Countermodernity", *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 3.2 (August 1999): 119-137. Also see Mathews, "Letting the World Do the Doing", *Australian Humanities Review* 33 (2004) <www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-August-2004/mathews.html> accessed 17 January 2005.