

## Finding the Perfect Gift: Sociological, Philosophical, and Theological Approaches

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The experience of gift-giving in contemporary society is, for the most part, an impoverished one. Instead of involving genuine, loving generosity, our gift-giving rituals tend to revolve around transactions, expectations, status, and subtle forms of bribery. Despite repeated exposure to tarnished models of gift, people nevertheless instinctively have a concept of the perfect gift. In “The Gift of the Magi,” O. Henry tells the story of a young, destitute couple who, at great personal cost, acquire lavish Christmas gifts for each other. When the wife presents her husband with a gold watch chain (for a watch which he has sold to acquire his gift for her) and the husband gives his wife jeweled combs for her hair (which she has cut off to fund her purchase for him), they are both left with unusable gifts. And yet, according to Russell W. Belk, “we are moved by the certainty that each lover has given to the other a pure and perfect gift.”<sup>1</sup> This recognition suggests that what is most important in a gift is not the actual, material item, but the intent and symbolic message behind it.

How do we recognize or characterise the perfect gift? Belk, who researches consumer practices and their relation to material goods, finds six characteristics revealed in the O. Henry story: sacrifice, altruism, luxury, appropriateness, surprise, and delight.<sup>2</sup> Belk suggests that the giver’s “agapic love” toward the recipient, a concept

<sup>1</sup> Russell W. Belk, “The Perfect Gift,” in Cele Otnes and Richard F. Beltramini, eds., *Gift Giving: A Research Anthology* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> 1) Sacrifice. The giver exhibits selfless generosity and commitment to the beloved through their willingness to make an extraordinary sacrifice. 2) Altruism. The perfect gift displays the giver’s concern for the recipient’s well-being apart from self-serving egoism or utilitarian motivation. 3) Luxury. The perfect gift is not a necessity filling lower-order needs; it falls within the category of extravagance, being a “tangible demonstration of the richness and depth of the love the giver feels toward the recipient.” 4) Appropriateness. The perfect gift is unique and specifically suited for the recipient. It reveals that the giver is attentive to the recipient’s wishes and desires without being told outright what they are and shows a profound understanding of and empathy toward the recipient. 5) Surprise. A gift that is requested negates its value. The perfect gift is given sans obligation, its spontaneity revealing its altruistic motive. 6) Delight. Despite being extravagant, the perfect gift carries no indication of bribery, expectation, or manipulation. It is entirely outside the realm of a

which has much in common with the Hebrew idea of *chesed* (mercy and kindness based on relationship), is what fuels the perfect gift.<sup>3</sup> “When a gift is motivated by apagic love, it is not selected and given to communicate a calculated message at all, but rather to express and celebrate our love for the other. It is spontaneous, affective, and celebratory rather than premeditated, cognitive, and calculated to achieve certain ends.”<sup>4</sup> Belk admits that the perfect gift, at least according to his definition, remains an elusive ideal instead of common practice, for the giver can never be entirely free from self-interest. However, ethicist Paul F. Camenisch recognises that the relational aspect of gift means that the motivations cannot be as neatly parsed as Belk supposes. Self-interest cannot be totally eradicated from the donor because the relationship between the giver and the recipient makes it impossible for one to be completely separated from the other. The desires of lovers are often intricately entwined, and to suggest that the perfect gift divorces these desires instead of bringing them into union is a somewhat ironic result of Belk’s definitive shunning of egoism.

In contrast, Camenisch makes the bond between the giver and the recipient an integral part of his rather precise definition of gift:

... a gift therefore will be understood as 1) some value 2) intentionally bestowed by a donor who gives it primarily to benefit the recipient upon 3) a recipient who a) accepts it knowing that it is given as a gift, b) agreeing with the donor that it is a benefit, c) who has no right to or claim upon it and d) who is not expected to pay for it in the future in any usual way (i.e., in no specific way in which roughly equivalent value is returned); and 4) which brings into being a new moral relationship between recipient and donor, part of which consists of recipient obligations to the donor and the acceptance of limits upon the use of the gift.<sup>5</sup>

His fourth point, in particular, contradicts Belk’s insistence that pure gift is free from obligation or expectation of any sort. Highlighting the bond which a gift forges between the donor and the recipient, Camenisch has no qualms using words such as “obligations” and “limits” to describe what comes into play when a gift is given. While Belk attempts to isolate the perfect gift, Camenisch contextualises it by viewing it as a catalyst for a “new moral relationship.”

In order to better understand these two approaches to gift (ideal and relational), I turn to the works of two seminal thinkers on the

reciprocal transaction, seeking only to bring delight to the recipient, asking for nothing in return. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Paul F. Camenisch, “Gift and Gratitude in Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9.1 (Spring 1981), p. 2.

topic: Marcel Mauss and Jacques Derrida. In addition, some thoughts from French philosopher, Jean-Luc Marion, will serve as a corrective to certain extremes encountered in Mauss and Derrida. I posit that the dialectic formed by these two views finds resolution in a third, theological approach, where we find not only indications of both unconditional and relational gift-giving, but some clarity and precision regarding the concept of gift by linking it with love.

### *The Relational Gift*

French sociologist Marcel Mauss's influential work, *Essai sur le don* (The Gift), originally published in 1925, is liberally cited in articles and books written on the topic of gift. Mauss's second-hand observations of gift-giving practices in what he terms "archaic societies" in Polynesia, Melanesia, and the Pacific Northwest led him to conclude that societal ties are formed through practices of reciprocity and exchange which serve as formal and informal contracts between individuals and groups. Mauss calls this system "total services," indicating that the so-called gift economy provides expression for religious, juridical, economic, familial, moral, and political structures and values.<sup>6</sup> In Mauss's view, there is no such thing as a free gift. He writes: "Almost always such services have taken the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest."<sup>7</sup> The contradictions in this statement bring up an important question. If the social practice of generosity is associated with obligation, deceit, and self-interest, can it really be termed a gift?

Throughout Mauss's treatment of the subject, he uses various terms to delineate different aspects of the gift economy practiced in certain regions. In the aboriginal tribes of the American Northwest, *potlatch*, a Chinook term meaning "to feed" or "to consume," is used to describe the highly developed network of rites, political ranking, and economic services which stem from an assumption of rivalry and hostility. What is at stake in the giving of gifts is one's honour, prestige, and authority, and failure to comply with expected gift-giving obligations brings with it severe consequences.<sup>8</sup> In societies which are not agonistic in principle, other terms reflect the role that gifts play in the economics of the clan. In Samoan and Maori contexts, *taonga* (personal possession) is closely linked to identity of

<sup>6</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, W.D. Halls, trans. (Routledge, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-8.

the person, the clan, and the earth, and because of this, is seen to possess a spiritual power or *hau*. When *taonga* is given to another person, the *hau* of the person goes with it. For these tribes, the gift is not merely an inanimate object but an animated commodity. Mauss explains: “Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary . . .”<sup>9</sup> The strength of the *taonga’s hau* is seen to be so far-reaching that it serves to facilitate the circulation of wealth as goods are passed or traded from one party to another until the item eventually lands back in the original donor’s hands, having strengthened societal ties through bestowing authority, prestige, and honour as it made the rounds.<sup>10</sup>

While these examples of “total services” seem to have more in common with exchange and transaction than gift, one can observe certain key elements of Belk’s “perfect gift” making an appearance. Sacrifice, appropriateness, and perhaps even delight can be found as one reads Mauss’s observations of reciprocation and transaction in various archaic societies. While the gift economies which Mauss describes miss the mark on many fronts as true gifts, there is one component, most notably present in the Maori ritual, which seems of special importance: the idea of *hau* or spiritual animation in the object itself. The merit of the gift comes not from its monetary value but because of its unique association with the giver. In effect, it carries the giver to the recipient and becomes a bonding agent between them. Mauss observes that in Maori tradition, “[T]o make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to explain how this idea becomes the basis of societal ties: “In this system of ideas one clearly and logically realizes that one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept part of his spiritual essence, of his soul.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> “All these institutions express one fact alone, one social system one precise state of mind: everything – food, women, children, property, talismans, land, labour services, priestly functions, and ranks – is there for passing on, and for balancing accounts. Everything passes to and fro as if there were a constant exchange of spiritual matter, including things and men, between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes, and the generations.” Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. There are two aspects of *hau* which I have chosen to exclude here because, in my estimation, they are distortions instead of central aspects of spiritual animation. The first is the idea that the *hau* of an object is always trying to get back to its place of origin. To retain the so-called gift would be to put oneself in opposition to a powerful spiritual force and risk great personal peril. The second is the idea that by giving a gift, the donor is able to exert magical or religious power over the recipient. Because the recipient is thought to accept part of the donor’s soul by accepting the gift, the object becomes a medium of control, a means whereby the donor takes up residence in the recipient’s life

Philosophers Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion argue that Mauss is not writing about gift at all, and his use of the words, gift and exchange, as if they are synonymous (evident even in the title of his book, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*) is highly problematic. However, their insistence that gift and exchange cannot exist in the same space situates gift, for the most part, outside of relationship. The notion of an isolated gift limits all the action to one direction, from donor to donee, and leaves no room for the donee to become, in turn, a donor. The strength of Mauss's work comes from his emphasis on the connections which gift exchange forms between people; within a relational approach, an act of reciprocity does not negate a gift as much as it validates the bond. One could say that gifts carry the glue which binds primitive societies together. Mauss does not attempt to isolate gifts from gift practices nor does he feel the need to distinguish between pure gift and obligatory exchange. What results is a mixed bag or melting pot, Mauss admits.<sup>13</sup> By allowing the idea of magnanimity to bump up against aspects of economics, religion, and politics, Mauss illustrates that in most societies, these elements are intertwined in a way which fosters mutually beneficial relationships between individuals and groups. In his conclusion, Mauss writes:

All in all, just as these gifts are not freely given, they are also not really disinterested. They already represent for the most part total counter-services, not only made with a view to paying for services or things, but also to maintaining a profitable alliance, one that cannot be rejected. . . . We can therefore see where this force resides. It is one that is both mystical and practical, one that ties clans together and at the same time constrains them to carry out exchange. Even in these societies, the individual and the group, or rather the subgroup, have always felt they had a sovereign right to refuse a contract. It is this that gives the stamp of generosity to this circulation of goods.<sup>14</sup>

Mauss concludes that a gift cannot be observed or studied in isolation. Gift-giving practices are always situated within relationship or community, and to dissect the event, separating the gift from the interested parties in order to arrive at pure gift, strips it of its very power to bind people together.

Mauss's observations of primitive gift-giving practices provide us with three valuable insights concerning gift. The first is that gifts build relationships and connect people. Mauss, imperfectly to be sure, shows that gifts are more than the sum of their parts. Whenever

and influences it. These two aspects suffuse the ritual with occult powers which are at cross-purposes to the intent of gift, serving to enslave and curse the recipient instead of delight or bless them.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

a gift is given, whenever something passes from one hand to the other and a change of possession takes place, relationship comes into play. The two parties, donor and donee, become connected in a new way. The second is that gifts are not entirely selfless because they bear something of the giver. Whether the gift is a symbolic gesture demonstrating the giver's feelings of love, or a sign of repentance and reconciliation, or a simple token of familial tenderness, it is unique in that its transference from the donor to the donee conveys an exclusive message between the two. Items crafted by the donor, personal effects from the donor's collection, photos of the donor, and gifts which the donor would use together with the donee could be perceived as inappropriately egocentric. However, these so-called self-interested gifts are often given with great vulnerability, expressing a desire for closer intimacy with the recipient. Contemporary gift-giving etiquette reflects a similar value. David Cheal observes that money is thought to be too impersonal a gift and therefore inadequate to fully express the commitment and care of the donor.<sup>15</sup> Since money does not bear the donor's mark in a unique way, there is no obvious connection between a hundred-dollar bill and the donor. In order to reinforce the relationship between the giver and the recipient, the gift must be identifiable as coming from a particular donor and intended for a particular donee.

The third point I take from Mauss's work is his observation that gifts are given within the context of community: what affects one party in the gift equation ends up affecting the other as well. If a gift given by the donor makes the donee happy, the donor will in all likelihood experience an increase in happiness as well. Conversely, a gift which causes distress to the donee will no doubt result in stress for the donor. To insist that the donor, in order to remain truly altruistic, not share in the joy or disappointment of the recipient, is to deny and repress the connection between the two. Sherry, McGrath, and Levy note that, "The gift threatens social ties as much as strengthens them. Gifts create internal stress by requiring an examination of the canons of propriety and a negotiation of identity: imputation and resistance of inauthentic versions of the self are critical elements of this stress."<sup>16</sup> In other words, social mores serve to make gift-giving practices a slim tightrope which one must walk with care, careful not to make a misstep. This brings us back to "total services," the archaic gift economies described by Mauss in intricate and complex detail. Highlighting the pressure to conform to social constructs

<sup>15</sup> David Cheal, "Gifts in Contemporary North America," in Cele Otnes and Richard F. Beltramini, eds., *Gift Giving: A Research Anthology* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> John F. Sherry Jr., Mary Ann McGrath, and Sidney J. Levy, "The Dark Side of Gift," *Journal of Business Research* 28 (1993), p. 237.

reinforces the notion that gifts cannot be viewed solely as binary transactions. We must acknowledge that gifts are always given within social contexts.

### *The Unconditional Gift*

We now turn our attention to the other end of the spectrum: the gift in isolation, free from all attachment. The thought of Derrida is important here because it dismantles certain premises associated with gift-giving and provides a counterpoint to Mauss's largely uncritical treatment of the subject. Derrida contends that although gift is related to the circulation of goods, it should also be that which interrupts reciprocity.

If there is gift, the *given* of the gift (*that which* one gives, *that which* is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving. . . . It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure. If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible."<sup>17</sup>

For Derrida, gift is annihilated or destroyed if there is any "reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt."<sup>18</sup> When a gift is countered with another gift, Derrida holds, the gift is annulled, and when the gift results in a debt, the gift becomes a burden instead of a boon. For this reason, the recipient should never give back. In fact, both the recipient and donor should not recognise a gift as gift, because as soon as this becomes a factor, the gift has begun to give back, if not in material form, then in a symbolic equivalent. The gift, when recognised as such, enters into the economic circle and by doing so, is destroyed.<sup>19</sup> Derrida contends that "*the gift as gift ought not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor*. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift."<sup>20</sup> As soon as the gift is acknowledged by the donor, Derrida insists, it gives back, whether praise, approval, gratification, self-congratulation, or some

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, Peggy Kamul, trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> "From the moment the gift would appear as gift . . . it would be engaged in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of the debt." *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

value associated with the giver's generosity.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, as soon as the recipient receives a gift, as soon as they take and keep the so-called gift, they are saddled with a debt. It is a debt of gratitude and an awareness that the donor has now gained some measure of credit with them.

What Derrida suggests is that a perfect forgetting on the part of both the donor and the donee must take place the instant the gift is given. This prevents the gift from becoming an occasion for restitution and repayment. What is also at play here is desire or intent. A gift is fuelled by the intent of one person to give something to another. The intent itself, Derrida posits, taints the gift. But without desire, without wanting-to-give, without significance as a gift, is it still a gift? Because Derrida insists that the gift must simultaneously appear and not appear, one can understand why he concludes that it is impossible to converse meaningfully about gift. It becomes another name for the impossible.<sup>22</sup>

Jean-Luc Marion, a postmodern philosopher and former student of Derrida, posits a variation which brings gift back into the realm of the possible. Marion questions the validity of attaching equal value to material and immaterial gains, thereby quantifying the benefits of gift-giving. He argues that rendering the act of giving into a simple transaction which can be shown to be part of an exchange economy, where one boon is traded for another, essentially annuls all altruism.<sup>23</sup> Marion points out that the idea of the impossible gift comes from trying to insert gift into a closed system, an economy of give and take, where both sides of the algebraic equation have to add up; in order for this to happen, the giver as well as the recipient must give a reasonable account for their respective roles. Some of this reasoning is workable, Marion shows, such as when the rich give their surplus goods to a humanitarian agency which distributes items of real value to the poor. The reason of justice is evident in this scenario where some measure of economic equalization is achieved. However, insisting that the gift must be evaluated or approached from within the horizons of exchange and economy drastically reduces the possibilities for engagement with the idea of gift. Instead of beginning from an economic horizon, Marion suggests that one begin with the gift itself.<sup>24</sup>

It is then possible to put forth several scenarios which fall outside exchange such as anonymous donations, an inheritance, and even

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," in Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy, eds., Shane Mackinlay and Nicolas de Warren, trans., *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 106-7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 112.



gifts to enemies which might incur greater animosity instead of any desirable benefit.<sup>25</sup> The ultimate gift which falls outside of exchange is the gift which is nothing apart from oneself: one's time, attention, care, and even one's life. Marion recognizes the paradox in this self-gift which has great value and no real value at the same time. "In giving this *nothing*, I give all that I have, because I am not giving something that I possess apart from myself, but rather that which I am."<sup>26</sup> Marion echoes the idea presented earlier in relation to the Maori concept of *hau*, which is that a true gift is one which reflects the desire to give oneself. Marion observes that any object given by a donor to a donee can be judged on a continuum of self-giving. Either the object signifies a denial of the gift of self (giving an object in lieu of the self) or it represents a promise of the gift of self (giving an object as a token of ongoing self-donation).

The most obvious theological example of self-gift is the person of Jesus Christ who represents not only God's love and mercy, but God himself.<sup>27</sup> The gift of God demonstrated through self-sacrifice, that is, Christ's death on the cross, effectuated humanity's salvation. Another aspect of divine self-gift is that of self-revelation. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."<sup>28</sup> A much earlier instance of divine self-revelation can be seen in the encounter between the shepherd Moses and God in Exodus 3. When Moses questions the voice speaking to him from a burning bush and asks for an identifying name, the response given is YHWH, a form of the verb "to be." While there is much discussion regarding the exact nature of the mysterious tetragrammaton and what it says about God, an equally significant point to this story is that the Eternal One gives Moses a name which, in contrast to the more common identifier – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – is entirely self-referential. This form of self-gift transcends the functional notion of God "for humanity" and reveals God "in himself."

In addition to the aspect of self-donation, this story illustrates another dimension of gift which Derrida alludes to when he positions gift outside the realm of possibility. One way to interpret Derrida's idealism is to think of gift as unconditional and inexhaustible. The problem, according to Derrida, is that as soon as something is recognised as a gift, it begins the slippery slide into an economy of exchange and obligation. What Derrida does not make allowance for is a being who is above self-interest and capable of giving unconditionally. The conditions which Derrida places on gift-giving do not apply when one does not need to exercise forgetfulness in order to engage

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> John 3:16; John 8:19.

<sup>28</sup> John 14:9.

in genuine altruism or when one exists outside the human economy. Therefore, if we apply Derrida's conditions for the ideal gift to God, the unconditioned One, it is possible to imagine the unconditional gift.

Crucial to Derrida's notion of gift as "the impossible" are two assumptions: 1) the motivation of the giver is never purely benevolent, and 2) the recipient necessarily incurs a form of indebtedness. However, if we identify the giver as the loving, unconditioned Creator God and recognise that all those on whom he bestows his benevolence will never be able to repay even a small part of this generosity, we come a bit closer to locating the concept of gift not so much in an economy, but in the identity of the giver. If the giver is unconditioned, then the gift is unconditional, the gift being representative of the donor himself. If the nature of the giver is inexhaustible, then the gift is inexhaustible since the donor's character is imbued in the gift. Since the giver defines the gift and gives it significance, the gift is nothing apart from its association to the giver.

A helpful metaphor here is Marion's notion of fatherhood as pure givenness. A father, Marion observes, gives the gift of life without the possibility of any true reciprocity. Therefore, the title of Father is a suitable name for God, making it possible to imagine an unconditioned and unreduced gift coming from a divine, unconditioned, and unreduced nature.<sup>29</sup> To state it positively, the divine self exhibits excess, a generosity within its very being, thereby taking what is in the realm of impossible and making it possible.<sup>30</sup> Marion writes: "To that which gains itself only in losing itself – namely, the gift, which gives itself in abandoning itself – nothing is impossible any longer. Not only does that which does not give itself lose itself, but nothing can ruin (*perdre*, lose) the gift, since it consists in the contradiction even of its possibility."<sup>31</sup> Marion takes the deconstructive work of Derrida concerning gift and, out of the rubble of the impossible, constructs an image of gift which unites the superfluous givenness of fatherhood with the impossibility of exchange, thereby revealing its unconditional nature.<sup>32</sup> What began as the impossible gift with Derrida becomes the possible impossibility in Marion's reference to fatherhood.

<sup>29</sup> Marion, "The Reason of the Gift," p. 122.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, feminist Genevieve Vaughan identifies largesse and gift with motherhood, stating that "the logic of gift giving is a maternal economic logic, the logic of the distribution of goods and services directly to needs." Genevieve Vaughan, "Introduction," in Genevieve Vaughan, ed., *Women and the Gift Economy: A Radically Different Worldview is Possible* (Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education, 2007), p. 7.

*Gift in Theology*

Both Mauss and Derrida allude to the idea that the act of giving sets up a power dynamic between two parties. This problem can be addressed by shifting the focus from human experience to divine nature. In theology, gift originates in the divine giver. The creation narratives in Genesis showcase God's generosity. John Milbank observes that, "God's original, creative donation *is* a kind of throwing away, or pointless excess. But *not* such that it is a gift to 'anyone' (who happens to be there, 'in the street'); rather, in order that there *be* an anyone at all, to receive."<sup>33</sup> In other words, God's magnanimity consists of much more than gifts given; God's benevolence is so comprehensive that it also brings into being recipients who are relationally capable of receiving and enjoying his gift(s).<sup>34</sup> Similarly, divine generosity is at the core of the expansive covenantal promises made to Abraham and in the generous offering of forgiveness in stories such as Hosea's marriage to an unfaithful prostitute and Jonah's reluctant warning to the people of Nineveh. All of these divine acts of giving are intricately linked to the cultivation of loving relationships. As mentioned earlier, the person of Jesus Christ stands as the supreme example of gift, a divine gesture of personal and costly beneficence without equal. In Christ we have the gift of God himself. Through this self-gift, God re-establishes and renews the covenant with humanity and sets in motion a new expression of a community (*ekklesia*) of trust and faith.

Central to the divine demonstration of generosity are the ideas not only of trust and love but of mutuality. John Milbank notes:

As against a logic which would associate a purity of love with unilateral action, it seems not insignificant that within romantic love an asymmetry of giving, where only one partner gives presents and favours, suggests not at all freedom and gratuitousness, but rather an obsessive admiration that subsists only at a wilfully melancholic distance, or still worse a purchase of sexual satisfaction, and in either case the slide of desire towards one-sided private possession. Giving here is most free where it is *yet* most bound, most mutual and most reciprocally demanded.<sup>35</sup>

It is important to note that Milbank is not dismissing unilateral giving in favour of a gift economy and all the obligations which accompany it. He is pointing out that in the context of a loving relationship, *giving to* is always joined to *giving back*. This is quite distinct from

<sup>33</sup> John Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11:1 (January 1995), p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> This is reminiscent of Hans Urs von Balthasar's notion of the divine author writing with the audience already in mind, in some sense, creating the audience through his writing.

<sup>35</sup> Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given?" p. 124.

the type of exchange Mauss refers to in his sociological analysis of primitive societies, and it has nothing in common with the tainted, self-interested gift which is so distasteful to Derrida.

Gift-giving within a mutually loving relationship paradoxically joins together concepts like willingness and obligation, freedom and restriction, and desire and denial. Contrary to the idea of exchange which seeks to maintain a careful equilibrium between two parties, loving mutuality thrives on excess - mutual, reciprocal excess. In referring to the difference between giving love (*agape*) and desiring love (*eros*), Milbank argues that though *giving love* is “above such play” as one finds in a human love relationship, theology must not make *agape* all about sacrifice and thereby extract the mutual desire and reciprocity evident in *eros*. Building on this idea, I contend that a comprehensive, more holistic view of love is key to defining the theological concept of gift. More specifically, the self-giving sacrifice of Christ (*agape*) must always be joined with God’s loving, unconditional pursuit of humanity (*eros*) and the generous offer of mutuality, of co-labouring with God (*philia*).

The nature of *agape* is described in the familiar biblical passage found in 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”<sup>36</sup> Though these words are often recited at weddings, it is interesting to note that the actual text contains no mention of reciprocity; the self-giving character of *agape* is largely unilateral, independent of any response from the recipient. Because of its unconditional nature, *agape* is often identified as ideal love, love that gives its all even when the recipient is unworthy or incapable of a suitable response. This type of love is exemplified in the *kenosis* (self-emptying) of Christ when he takes on human form.<sup>37</sup> However, this self-emptying is not unique to the person of Christ. It is worth quoting Hans Urs von Balthasar at some length on the subject.

For the Father strips himself, without remainder, of his Godhead and hands it over to the Son; he “imparts” to the Son all that is his. . . . The Father must not be thought to exist “prior” to this self-surrender that holds nothing back. This divine act that brings forth the Son, that is, the second way of participating in (and of being) the identical godhead,

<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, NRSV.

<sup>37</sup> “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself (*ekenosev*), taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Philippians 2:5-8, NRSV.

involves the positing of an absolute, infinite “distance” that can contain and embrace all the other distances that are possible within the world of finitude, including the distance of sin. Inherent in the Father’s love is an absolute renunciation: he will not be God for himself alone. He lets go of his divinity and, in this sense, manifests a (divine) Godlessness (of love, of course). The latter must not be confused with the godlessness that is found within the world, although it undergirds it, renders it possible and goes beyond it. The Son’s answer to the gift of Godhead (of equal substance with the Father) can only be eternal thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) to the Father, the Source – a thanksgiving as selfless and unreserved as the Father’s original self-surrender.<sup>38</sup>

There are several important points to note in Balthasar’s description of God’s kenotic, self-giving love. The first is that *kenosis* is inherent in God’s triune nature and not a feature exclusive to the incarnation event. The person of Jesus Christ reveals a God who is eternally, lovingly, and generously kenotic, not because his life, death, and resurrection were necessary in order to re-establish God’s holiness,<sup>39</sup> but because *kenosis* is part of the divine essence, an expression of giving love (*agape*).<sup>40</sup> Balthasar goes on:

... the Father, in uttering and surrendering himself without reserve, does not lose himself. He does not extinguish himself by self-giving, just as he does not keep back anything of himself either. For, in this self-surrender, he *is* the whole divine essence. Here we see both God’s infinite power and his powerlessness; he cannot be God in any other way but in this “kenosis” within the Godhead itself. (Yet what omnipotence is revealed here! He brings forth a God who is of equal substance and therefore uncreated, even if, in this self-surrender, he must go to the very extreme of self-lessness.)<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action*, Graham Harrison, trans. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 323-24.

<sup>39</sup> In the Middle Ages, the Dominicans and the Franciscans debated whether the Incarnation would have taken place had humanity not sinned. John Duns Scotus (Franciscan) believed that the incarnation was part of God’s intention from the beginning. Thomas Aquinas (Dominican) held that the appearance of Jesus Christ in history was a response to sin, necessary for atonement, though he allowed that the Incarnation could have been viewed as the consummation of God’s glory before sin entered the world. Both views were eventually accepted by the Church as having biblical support, and therefore within the realm of orthodoxy. See Thomas Aquinas, “The Fitness of the Incarnation,” Article III and “The Act of Faith,” Article VII, *Summa Theologiae*, Fathers of the English Dominican Province, trans. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). See also Pope Benedict XVI, “John Duns Scotus,” in *Great Christian Thinkers: From the Early Church Through the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), pp. 301-5.

<sup>40</sup> 1 John 4:8.

<sup>41</sup> Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4, p. 325.

By identifying *kenosis* and self-surrender at the very heart of the immanent Trinity,<sup>42</sup> Balthasar provides us with a theological model for the concept of gift. The always-giving God is also the always-receiving God; the powerful God is also the self-limiting God.

A further point which can be drawn from Balthasar's depiction of the Godhead is that the intent of gift is always directed toward the other, inviting reciprocity. In loving, agapic, kenotic gift, true mutuality is possible. The "distance" which the three-in-one God creates within Godself makes possible human freedom and divine/human covenant. Another distinction (which was already alluded to above) is the inexhaustible nature of divine gift. God holds nothing back and yet God's eternal self-giving never renders him any less than he is.<sup>43</sup>

A second facet of gift in theology can be found in the concept of *eros* (desiring love). The most explicit theological text which portrays the passionate pursuit of a lover for his/her beloved is the Song of Songs. Both bride and bridegroom give voice to their mutual desire and love; they call to each other, express their longing to be together, and share affectionate intimacies, extolling each other's admirable qualities: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely."<sup>44</sup>

In addition to passion, *eros* contains the notion of unrelenting pursuit. Though the actual Greek word (*eros*) is not found in the New Testament, the idea of sensual, desiring love can be found in several biblical stories. In the book of Hosea, a prophet marries a prostitute in response to a directive from God. The couple's relationship is to be a living representation of God's faithfulness to Israel despite Israel's inconstancy. It is a tale of desire, infidelity, tenderness, and redemption. Though Hosea's wife, Gomer, breaks her marriage vows on many occasions, Hosea's fidelity eventually transforms their relationship from a master/servant dynamic, where one party dominates the other, to that of a husband and wife who give and receive love freely. Hosea and Gomer's marriage parallels God's ongoing pursuit of the nation of Israel despite its unfaithfulness to the bilateral covenant in which God declares, "You are my people," and Israel responds

<sup>42</sup> "This primal kenosis makes possible all other kenotic movements of God into the world; they are simply its consequences." Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>43</sup> "For since He Whom God has sent speaks the words of God [proclaims God's own message], God does not give Him His Spirit sparingly or by measure, but boundless is the gift God makes of His Spirit! The Father loves the Son and has given (entrusted, committed) everything into His hand." John 3:34-35. The Amplified Bible ©1987 by The Zondervan Corporation and The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>44</sup> Song of Solomon 2:13b-14, NRSV.

with, “You are my God.”<sup>45</sup> In *eros* we observe that the giver is not a disinterested party; the benefactor actively pursues a relationship with the object of his desire. In *agape*, the posture of self-surrender is at the fore. In *eros*, the focus is on an unrelenting, passionate commitment to mutual exclusivity and intimacy with another. The gift being offered here is worth; the pursuer bestows on his beloved an immeasurable value due to her special and unique significance to him.

A third dimension of gift is illustrated by the Greek word *philia* which, of the three words, carries the strongest sense of mutuality. Essentially, *philia* is the bond of friendship, the loyalty of brotherly love, and the companionship and camaraderie found between equals. If *agape* is giving love and *eros* is desiring love, then *philia* is collaborating love. In the biblical text, a form of the word *philia* is used to describe the love the Father has for the disciples and the love the disciples have for Jesus.<sup>46</sup> *Philia* is also used to characterise true followers of Christ, those who have “love for the Lord,”<sup>47</sup> and is employed to describe the love Jesus has for Lazarus and for John the disciple.<sup>48</sup>

We find mutuality present in the covenant which YHWH establishes with Abram in Genesis. Whereas one might expect a supreme deity to issue unilateral edicts and directives, the establishment of a covenant where both parties have obligations exhibits a surprising amount of parity. Other examples of this divine desire for collaboration are found in stories where mere mortals are negotiating with Almighty God. I reference but one example.<sup>49</sup> Not long after God rescued the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt, they fashioned an idol, a golden calf to worship, thereby displacing YHWH as their object of desire. As a result of this betrayal, God’s anger was kindled and he declared his intent to destroy an unfaithful people. However, Moses pleaded with God to change his mind, to spare the Israelites

<sup>45</sup> Hosea 2. The depiction of Christ and the Church as husband and wife in Ephesians 5 contains both desire and self-sacrifice.

<sup>46</sup> John 16:27.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:22, NRSV.

<sup>48</sup> John 11:3, 36; John 2:20. The concept of mutuality or collaboration between divine and human can also be found in the idea of co-working (*synergeo*) when Paul writes that “we are fellow workmen (joint promoters, laborers together) with and for God.” 1 Corinthians 3:9, The Amplified Bible. See also 2 Corinthians 6:1: “Labouring together [as God’s fellow workers] with Him then, we beg of you not to receive the grace of God in vain . . .” The Amplified Bible.

<sup>49</sup> Other stories include Abraham negotiating with God about how many righteous souls (from 50 down to 10) it would take to save Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-33) and the account of Moses being commissioned by YHWH to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Here we find a lengthy dialogue between God and Moses in which Moses questions his ability to do the job and YHWH provides reassurances (concessions?) such as a miracle and a spokesperson to do the talking (Exodus 3-4).

and give them another chance. According to the account in Exodus, Moses prevailed and God turned away from his destructive plan.<sup>50</sup> The weight given to Moses's words in this exchange has proven problematic for some readers because it seems to bring into question the omnipotence of God. However, if this is a God defined by self-sacrifice, a God who places significant value on humanity, a God who is committed to collaboration,<sup>51</sup> this is very much in character because it demonstrates the gift of friendship.

In summary, a theological treatment of gift allows for both ideal and relational approaches, but it is able to go beyond this rudimentary binary by linking gift with love in its various expressions. A genuine gift communicates not only the character but the intent of the giver. In a theological context, this translates to the societal God desiring to be in relationship with humanity, to be not merely a benefactor (*agape*) but a lover (*eros*) and a friend (*philia*). In the theological understanding of gift we find echoes of Mauss's reference to the relational "stickiness" and mutuality inherent in giving and receiving. There is also resonance with Derrida's insistence that gift must be untainted by egoism and self-interest and demonstration of Marion's notion that gift (true givenness) is by nature unconditional and inexhaustible, demonstrated when the Father gave his only Son to the world. The perfect gift, then, exists not in a vacuum, but in the many expressions of God's love within the Godhead and throughout the history of humanity.

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<sup>50</sup> Exodus 32:1-14.

<sup>51</sup> "And the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." Exodus 33:11, NRSV.