



# Giving as Loving: a requiem for the gift?

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Accepted: 21 January 2021

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## Abstract

The fruit borne of the debate concerning the economy of the gift carried out between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion in the 1990s continues to ripen into the present with publications like Anthony Steinbock's lucid *It's not about the Gift: From Givenness to Loving* (2018). I challenge and qualify the fundamental argument of this book in dialogue with two principal French proponents of givenness, Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion, against whom Steinbock promotes his strategy of the gift. While Steinbock wishes to displace our relation to the other from giving to loving, I suggest that the discourse of givenness remains the very movement of loving as such. Steinbock occupies a position reminiscent of, but not reducible to, gift-exchange theory, rooted in reciprocity between lover and beloved, whereas I am inclined to move near to the terrain of the unconditioned gift in which loving need not entail reciprocity. My position is not so much a counterclaim as it is a clarification of the inextricable unity between giving and loving. The final section contends that the I enlarge my horizon when I give myself because I do not grasp the other, nor do I expect or obligate the other's givenness in return; rather in my growth beyond my own self-interest, I allow the other to be given just as the other likes to be given.

## 1 Introduction

The fruit borne of the debate concerning the economy of the gift carried out between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion in the 1990s continues to ripen into the present with publications like Anthony Steinbock's lucid *It's not about the Gift: From Givenness to Loving* (2018).<sup>1</sup> While attending to the antecedents of the Derrida-Marion exchange in the figures of Mauss, Husserl, and Heidegger, this volume introduces Moses Maimonides and other religious-cum-philosophical (and mystical)

<sup>1</sup> Steinbock (2018).; also see the excellent exposition of the debate, especially between Marion and Derrida, Jason Alvis (2016, chapter 1).

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voices into the debate, harvesting from them a fertile compendium of insights that prompt the reader to shift the “gift” from a calculus of economic obligations to a interpersonal nexus of “beloveds.” Equally important, Steinbock remains justly occupied with fundamental phenomenological questions about the nature and scope of givenness, in which it is claimed the given subsists at all only to the extent it disappears in the humility of love reciprocated between lover and beloved. I should like to interrogate this fundamental axiom illuminated with skill by Steinbock in order to offer my own clarification that givenness makes possible and thereby constitutes the very performative context of acts of interpersonal loving. My position does not yield to the idea that giving constitutes a “foundation” of love, but rather to the notion that there lies an inextricable unity between giving and loving.

To be clear, I wish to accomplish the preliminaries of a sketch of an inversion of Steinbock’s itinerary, without implying that Steinbock’s strategy leads us astray. Whereas he moves from givenness to loving, I should like to move in the opposite direction, from loving to givenness—so that the two movements shall converge one upon the other. I suggest, in short, that the latter (givenness) makes possible and is manifest in the way of life of the former (loving), to the degree that they dovetail. I expand/grow when I give myself because I do not grasp the other, nor do I expect or obligate the other’s givenness in return; rather in my growth beyond my own self-interest, I allow the other to be given just as the other likes to be given, which counts as the performance of love. While I acknowledge that the debate concerning the gift need not remain seized up at the level of possibility versus impossibility (here I concur with Steinbock’s critique of Derrida), I challenge the following notion: that overcoming the stalemate-like inertia of the debate requires us to adopt the vocabulary of love at the expense of the vocabulary of gift and givenness.

In so doing I propose the first stage of a supplement, namely, that the process of giving to which the gift belongs is neither resolved in nor disappears within love but instead constitutes the performative act of love as such. I would argue that if we remove giving, it follows that the interpersonal nexus of love collapses. Here we must selectively revisit (in conjunction with Steinbock’s own sensitive readings of) thinkers like Heidegger, Marion, Henry, whose work advanced meticulous inventories of the internal movement of givenness. I intend to manage my slight disagreement with Steinbock’s insightful study in the spirit of interchange and dialogue about the most basic structure of the gift giving. Presently we turn to the economy of the gift and how it is reconfigured and expressed in Steinbock’s hermeneutic of love-and-beloved.

## 2 Steinbock’s beloved

While Steinbock’s thesis does not duplicate or mimic the logic of gift-exchange theory, his analysis certainly echoes aspects of its structure, namely, I give so that you may give, or *do ut des*. Marcel Mauss’s sociological analysis of the address between giver and givee articulates the underlying, often unconscious, “function” of gift exchange: the resultant bond of friendship that occurs between the two parties

involved in the act of mutual exchange. This, of course, lays the groundwork for Derrida's widely-read critique of the possibility of the gift as such.

How can a gift, Derrida queries, subsist as a gift if it obligates a reciprocation in kind (which can provoke a rivalry of generosity that culminates in the hostility of a "potlatch")? Obligation and debt appear to contravene the very nature of the gift, should we define the gift as gratuitous, free, and unconditional in its givenness. Do I give so that I may receive an object in return from you, a process that then reduces the gift to an exchange of objects, an insidious surrogate of economic circulation and contractual commitment?<sup>2</sup>

Derrida's deconstruction of the gift invites us to reconsider the gift according to the inescapability of economic logic: that a gift always involves an expectation of return, which in time, *can* make the gift disappear into the cold (and impersonal) transaction of contractual obligation. An economy subsists as an exchange of gifts that annuls the gift at its root, precisely because the motif of exchange values, amortization of expenditures, circulation of goods, monetary signs or merchandise, and the economic field in general, defines the essence of giving *as* an odyssey of the circle, and thus, makes the gift impossible, or something more like an *aporia*, from the outset.<sup>3</sup>

Steinbock intervenes at this juncture on two fronts, in order to recuperate the gift. In the early chapters of his book he champions the moral emotion of humility as an existential mood we should cultivate if we are to grow in our capacity to be genuine recipients of the gift (and thus break out of the circle of economic exchange, of *do ut des*). We feel humble gratitude in being a recipient, but in principle we do not feel surprise. How does this distinction between humility and surprise illustrate the gift-exchange theory in a new light?

Surprise regularly arises upon receipt of gift. It is in point of fact a cultural convention to play the role of pleasantly surprised recipient. "Wow," I say, "thank you so much for that thoughtful gesture!" as I react to your gift in a moment of surprise in that I was not expecting your generous offer to give me a lift to work every day while my own car waits at the garage to be fixed. Yet, this reaction is not as innocent as it may at first appear.

While seemingly a natural response, surprise simply perpetuates the circle of exchange in that the economy of the mutual obligation casts us both into a back-and-forth of giving, aimed at meeting unspoken expectations. When I offer you a space in my vehicle, I "expect" you to acknowledge my magnanimous gesture, and you must do so with due deference and not a little surprise, and perhaps, in so doing greet me with a bottle of wine as physical gift in return; if you fail in this regard, I may experience your withholding a gift as an insult. But if you give me the bottle of wine (as well as many "thank yous!"), then it follows I in turn play the part of surprised recipient—and so on. The circle of exchange trades on expectations that are rooted in pride and resentment, precisely in the sense that I make the exchange about "me" rather than you. Steinbock describes pride as the chief form of "clinging to

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<sup>2</sup> Mauss (2002, p.22).

<sup>3</sup> Derrida (1992, p.25).

self” in a bid for ultimate self-gratification. The gift falls under the coup of pride in that pride corresponds to “the unmotivated and self-dissimulating self-salience that includes and presupposes others through their exclusion.”<sup>4</sup> Pride and resentment, once they creep into our giving to others, do nothing more than fund economic circularity because both vices thrive on expectation—the deep well of egoism that consistently communicates to me that “I deserve” a gift in return. Humility, on the other hand, downplays if not eliminates expectations altogether, which abolishes the very justification of surprise.

In humility, states Steinbock, I qualify myself as simply open to what is given, an “openness toward and a reception of what is given.”<sup>5</sup> The existential outcome lies in the feeling of gratitude that fundamentally opposes the feeling of being owed or the expectation that I should receive something. The temporal mode of the future as an “expectation” does not occur at all in the act or posture of humility. When I receive a gift within the moral topography of humility I stand before the other as thankful even while I did not expect or anticipate the gift. I remain thankful and grateful while I recruit and retain the moral world of humility, formulated as an “accepting-ahead” of the gift, which does not suspend the future but does not expect an anticipated end.

Like an empty intention that does not expect anything in particular because it does not try to implement the intentional act of expectation on any level, humility invokes that mood that “I experience that I deserve nothing.”<sup>6</sup> In this there is not a fulfilment of an intention because the lived experience of humility eludes the intention-fulfilment dyad altogether; that is, “there is no expectation of a fulfilment through what I intend, no disappointment, no rupture. Indeed, I cannot even regard myself as undeserving then to have the experience be one of humility. Experiencing that I am undeserving, for example, is possible only in and through the reception of the gift in humility.”<sup>7</sup> There is therefore no disappointment of expectation in humility because I expect nothing in humility.

Humility, then, prompts and governs the particular moral movement from giving to loving. For Steinbock, a deliberate sequence of humble detachment from self obtains, which permits a gift to be given to me. Yet detachment should not descend into self-effacement or escapism or indifference. The latter (self-effacement) is not a species of the former (humble detachment). One way to highlight the fundamental and unwavering distinction between humility and self-effacement, framed in Steinbock’s narrative, is to acknowledge Heidegger’s problematic conception of *Ereignis*. While it is not necessary in the present venue to offer the careful reading of Heidegger’s vernacular it demands, we note Steinbock’s capable and illuminating critique in the context of the gift and givenness. I do not interrogate the accuracy of Steinbock’s interpretation of Heidegger (I leave that to others), in other words.

<sup>4</sup> Steinbock (2018, p.108).

<sup>5</sup> Steinbock, (2018, p.26). See also Steinbock’s earlier work on the identification of pride with a form of idolatry in the excellent (2007, pp.18, 120–23).

<sup>6</sup> Steinbock, (2018, p.27).

<sup>7</sup> Steinbock, (2018, p.27).

Thus, for the purpose of shedding light on his hermeneutic of the beloved, I note that *Ereignis* signals, for Steinbock, a type of forbidding aperçu about the manifestation of the other, granted in the context of Being whose presence is given independent of embodied beings, historical narratives, and cultural lexicons. The “withdrawal” enacted by *Ereignis* of the self from the world of subjects and the daily givens or objects in which we traffic elucidates the space in which the self-disclosure of Being transpires. That is, the retraction of Dasein within itself is exercised *not* for the sake of other. I abandon not only myself but also the field of beings in general. Conceived in cryptic ontological idiom of Heidegger, he suggests that to be open to what is given that we imitate “the abandonment of beings by being.”<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger’s elusive language entitles us to conclude that love enjoys no genuine analysis in the unfolding *Ereignis* of Beings’s givenness. *Ereignis* may mean “eventing,” “occurring,” “happening,” and “belonging,” “appropriating.”<sup>9</sup> Steinbock converts these diverse vocabularies into a single meta-term, “withdrawal.” Steinbock contends that *Ereignis* motivates us to admit “our thinking ‘task’ would therefore reflect nonobtrusively, without memory, without anticipation, the ‘Taking-place’ as it takes-place. Sheer eventing is sheer destining.”<sup>10</sup> The impersonal “it” of “It Gives” amounts to a refusal of love precisely because “it” constitutes a withdrawal from moral judgement and interpersonal intervention. In the context of the giver-givee relationship, the “it” maintains all parties assume a nonobtrusive, indifferent position in the face of the givenness of the other. Steinbock rightly asks: how can I love if I am to assume the position of indifferent bystander or nonobtrusive spectator?

Humility’s advance toward the beloved contrasts sharply with withdrawal and the corresponding alienation of self from world enacted by *Ereignis*. To use the vocabulary of beloved, as Steinbock urges, is to set into operation an intensely personal reciprocation between self and other, a type of concrete accompaniment in the self-givenness of relationship. To give is to embody the gratitude of humility’s “openness to what is given,” just as humility simultaneously gives itself according to the intentional operation of loving. The lover accompanies the beloved not as an episode of hospitality or a one-off gesture of companionship, but as protracted way of life: “the Lover reveals itself through loving *as* beloved.” Instead of withholding or retreating from the other, the Lover joins the beloved by performing love in the form of ceaseless non-abandonment. In this practice, the Lover endures the interpersonal relation in and through the excess of always being vulnerable to, and available for, the other. We are called to “vigilance” in loving.<sup>11</sup>

The volume *It’s not about the Gift* is not so much an attempt to overcome the objectifying relationships prompted by the economic logic of gift-exchange as it is a warning of the prospects of a lack of relationship altogether, which remain endemic in our late modern world (where loneliness and anonymity are norms), articulated

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger (2012, p.27).

<sup>9</sup> For more on *Ereignis* see some of the following nuanced expositions of the term, in Andrew Mitchell (2015, pp.118–20); Fried (2000, chapter 2).

<sup>10</sup> Steinbock (2018, p.47).

<sup>11</sup> Steinbock (2018, p.49).

in the rupture from beings summoned by the impersonal disposition of *Ereignis*. Should we desire to overcome the economy of the gift, we could invoke the protective measures outlined in Heidegger's *Ereignis* on behalf of the indifferent bystander. I prioritize myself above all by shielding myself from the other, and so, ultimately from the vulnerability to which love necessarily exposes me. *Ereignis* belongs to the process whereby I abstain from the adventure of the gift. To belabour the point, the indifference of *Ereignis* amounts to the abdication of "my" accompanying "you" in love.

For Steinbock, inspired above all by Maimonides, genuine giving dissolves into a love that accompanies. Passionate and involved, and thus no mere indifferent spectator at a remove, the lover initiates a relationship with the beloved. In this accompaniment, which (hopefully) is mutual and reciprocal, and thus interpersonal, "individuals are let be, but in their uniqueness, without vigilant, overabundant loving somehow reducing them to radical immanence."<sup>12</sup> If I practice indifference toward the other, or, more than that, if I withdraw, then I may well escape the economy of the gift, but I also escape the orbit of the interpersonal nexus of love. This is exactly why Steinbock's strategy drifts closer to Mauss than to Heidegger and Derrida.

If I am humble in the reception of the gift, how do I remain humble when I assume the role of giver? At the level of gift-giving, in Steinbock's paradigm of "beloveds," the gift itself is set aside. It is not the point. The giver and givee's unity in love is intrinsic to the movement that overcomes indifference and self-effacement. Interpersonal acts of love perform serves the other for sake of the other *as* other, who never may be objectified as a receptacle of my gift. The Jewish terminology of *Mitzvah*, or good deed, inserts itself into Steinbock's narrative here as a symbol of the intersection between the other and the source of all good deeds, the divine other, the vector of verticality.<sup>13</sup>

And so: the givenness of myself to the other in the mode of *Mitzvah* constitutes an "intervention" in loving that is liberative and ethical. Hence, "There is a direct concern with the other person, from the other, for the other person—and *not a concern with the gift as such*. There is a direct 'relation' with the other person that allows the gift to emerge as gift, for me as lover, and for the other as beloved, in humility."<sup>14</sup> The interpersonal nexus of beloveds, according to Steinbock, never may refuse the advance of vigilant love, whether I am the giver or the recipient/givee. If on the receiving end, I give back in love, for I am not a freeloader, but I do so out of spontaneous generosity, not out a sense of obligation that I must meet an expectation of a counter-gift.

One concrete, if trivial, example may help illustrate Steinbock's thesis can be found in Claude Levi-Strauss' analysis of the economy gift. Deeply influenced by the Maussian notion of reciprocity (like Steinbock is), the work of Levi-Strauss unveils instances of the gift that demonstrate styles of reciprocity (between individuals or groups) achievable without debt, obligation or economic circularity. In the

<sup>12</sup> Steinbock (2018, p.49).

<sup>13</sup> Steinbock, (2018, p.128).

<sup>14</sup> Steinbock, (2018, p.130).

South of France, at least in the mid twentieth-century (and perhaps today), it was common for strangers to meet across from one another at a restaurant. The typical seating arrangement consisted of long tables with benches so that a meal was consumed in the midst of acquaintances and strangers. The setting encouraged hospitality to be given in the context of a face-to-face conversation, but one initiated by the gift of wine.

The scenario unfolded in the following manner. Each guest would be seated with a small carafe of wine (it's included in the meal), assigned to her seat. Stranger or not, the custom is to pour from one's own carafe a generous portion of wine into the glass of the neighbour across the table. "Wine offered calls for wine returned, cordiality requires cordiality. The relationship of indifference can never be restored once it has been ended by one of the table companions."<sup>15</sup> The neighbour automatically returns the gesture in kind, emptying her own carafe into your glass.

In this intimate setting where strangers meet over a meal, wine becomes something like a social commodity that cannot be strictly commodified. Neither companion is subject to economic gain or loss. The carafes are identical in volume and their contents similar in quality. Neither companion has received more or less wine than if she had consumed her own carafe. The economy of the gift breaks the circle of obligation because its logic lies in the non-commodified economy of friendship, intimacy, and conversation, a bond united together by wine in a little restaurant in the South of France. Wine, of course, is not bereft of a certain aura in that part of Europe. It occupies in the spirit of the French a principal industry and contributes to the livelihood of that region (especially the South of France). Cherished as a national treasure and source of great pride, wine is more than a social fact or social commodity, for it can enable two strangers to overcome their usual reserve.<sup>16</sup> To use the language of Steinbock, their intimacy of spending a few hours in conversation is grounded in a mutual "accepting ahead" of gifts exchanged, of wine and conversation consummated in an interpersonal nexus of beloveds. The humility on display reflects the reality that the companions neither lord expectation over the other nor withdraw from the givenness of sharing in the "rich food" par excellence that wine symbolizes in the South of France. The symbolic power of wine here manifests leisure and livelihood, more than fermented liquid produced from a crop of grapes. To share each other's wine is to forget the gift itself (e.g., the wine) and take a step toward vigilant love, even if it is only a beginning, over a shared meal. We shall return to sacramental bread and wine below, and how that gift constitutes undoubtedly a vertical vector of loving moving from divine to the human.

We are now in a position to translate this debate into the vocabulary of contemporary French phenomenology. Steinbock singles out not only Heidegger but Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion for critical treatment in this context of beloveds. Henry, whom I have addressed in detail elsewhere, certainly gives readers pause concerning the question of an attribution to him of Gnostic escapism.<sup>17</sup> Attending to his work

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<sup>15</sup> Lévi-Strauss (1969, p.59).

<sup>16</sup> Lévi-Strauss (1969, pp.58–60).

<sup>17</sup> See Rivera (2015, chapter 4).

nonetheless pays dividends here precisely because he excavates the primal sources of our loving, of our agency, and of our interpersonal nexus of mutual affection, that of a most basic ground all relationality, that of *givenness*. Marion, too, prioritizes givenness as the stage for the manifestation and consummation of love between beloveds.<sup>18</sup> To their work we now turn.

### 3 The priority of giving: humility

I do not intend to follow the fine-grain survey of the problematic of givenness Steinbock explores in Henry and Marion. Rather than offer a compilation of, and mitigating gloss on, the technicalities of Steinbock's competent reading, I shall instead discuss if giving-as-loving is impersonal, aloof, and indifferent.<sup>19</sup> I suggest it is not, and I do so in conjunction with Henry and Marion. The principle of the "priority of givenness" defended in the work of Henry and Marion evokes of necessity the performative and contemplative expression of love *as* giving, a thesis aided by the formation of the gift sketched in their work. I take each in turn.

In the work of Henry, especially in the late trilogy on Christianity, he argues that the fundamental passivity in which I discover myself as given to myself by Life. It comes to define me in proportion to the intensity in which I live in and through that source. Henry, furthermore, suggests that we forget we are born sons and daughters of Life. Even though I am born in the invisible domain of auto-affection, I forget it! I feel myself in generative unity with myself just as crush against myself in absolute immanence, entirely independent of my visible modalities and powers of reflection, thinking, language, and agency—and yet I forget this source of my being as truly the essence of who I am (Steinbock make this point repeatedly in his reading of Henry).

How do we forget such a generative domain of self-feeling? I am inclined, by way of the gradual arrangement of habit, to forget my invisible feeling of self-experience precisely because I am drawn naturally into the illusion that I empower myself and define myself by the world and its canons of rationality. Such is the lure of late modern autonomy and self-sufficiency.<sup>20</sup> All is not lost; I can recall my original givenness of myself in Life's absolute self-givenness. How?

By way of acts of mercy (by giving myself in service to you) I remember and recall the living and generative source of my affective connection to myself, in which I undergo transformation or rebirth into Life. Mercy reminds me that I arrive where I am out of grace and mercy, not conditioned by anything I do. I am heteronomous in that I have been given life by absolute Life. To this Henry adds that I can

<sup>18</sup> See Rivera (2018).

<sup>19</sup> The clearest critique of Henry in this manner lies in the following quote: Henry, "necessarily withdraws from transcendence, from the world, in a kind of fundamental forgetfulness reminiscent *mutatis mutandis* of Heidegger's 'withdrawal' of the It that gives." Steinbock (2018, p.89).

<sup>20</sup> Henry's most accessible critique of modernity's vision of autonomy and the self-sufficiency of scientific positivism, see Henry (2012b, chapter 3).



remember the secret of the gift of my invisible life only properly “by doing, not in knowledge.”<sup>21</sup>

What determines the movement of remembrance, if not reflective judgment or thinking? It is a genuine spiritual practice of abnegation from myself (not withdrawal). In this move of Henry’s, the “I” rejects the idea that “I” am the Cartesian fulcrum or transcendental reference point of the world; in my sustained commitment to mercy I thwart my tendency toward self-legislating egoism. Henry is clear that selfishness, obligation, expectations, and the calculus of economic exchange are rooted in the assumption that I presume to be my own origin, and as a consequence, that I am master of my own life, in which I set my face in direct rivalry with other autonomous agents.<sup>22</sup> Two paradigms of philosophical anthropology, then, clash in a rivalry for our fealty. (i) The discourse of the nominative “I” derived from the Cartesian ego stands against the (ii) depiction of passivity of the accusative “me” that Henry adopts.

The “me” for Henry is not self-generating or self-positing, because it does not attempt to bring itself into the condition that is its own.<sup>23</sup> The pragmatic corollary proceeds from the fact that “The more the ego is concerned with itself, the more its true essence escapes it. The more it thinks of itself, the more it forgets its condition of Son.”<sup>24</sup> Or, in explicit theological language, Henry suspects that, “The more the ego leans on itself with a view to elevating itself, the more the ground disappears under its feet. But the more the ego forgets itself and confides itself to life, the more it will be open to the unlimited strength of that life and the more strength will surge up in it, making it invincible: ‘For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18.9–14).’”<sup>25</sup> I remember my true “me” by forgetting myself, and I forget myself by giving myself.

In this it appears that I first give myself to the other in humility. Yet, the declension of the self into a “me” indicates that a more primal reduction must occur (to reduce the giving-to back to its original self-giveness): I manage to give myself to the other only because I acknowledge I am first given to myself by Life’s self-giveness. That is, I am this “me” to whom is given life as the gift that permits me the privilege of giving myself in love. There remains, by force of the priority givenness, no self at all without my first having been given to myself.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Henry (2003, p.171).

<sup>22</sup> When gift-exchange trades on logic of strict reciprocity, Henry agrees with Mauss that it often engenders violence and competitive hostility. Henry writes, “Limited to its human reference, is reciprocity not often hostility in all its shapes: competition, rivalry, antagonism of ambitions and interests, pretence, intrigue, lying, resentment, hatred, violence, aggression, and finally war?” Henry (2012a, p.37).

<sup>23</sup> Henry (2003, pp.135–36).

<sup>24</sup> Henry (2003, p.144).

<sup>25</sup> Henry (2003, p.211).

<sup>26</sup> For Henry givenness leads to the very idea of a self at all, who is for that reason capable of loving the other. Henry writes of the self’s primal passivity, or what I would call primal receptivity of life: “What life gives is itself. Life is self-giveness in a radical and rigours sense, in the sense that it is both life that gives and life that is given. Because it is life that gives, we can only have a share of this gift in life. Because life is what is given in this gift, we can only have access to life in life.” Henry (2008, p.120).

Henry exploits here (and on several occasions in the trilogy) the words of the Apostle John in service of what he calls a Johannine “arch-intelligibility”<sup>27</sup> or an “arch-Christology”<sup>28</sup> of the gift, whereby the self learns its selfhood is given to itself in the self-giveness of absolute Life: that “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4.19).<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the only reason I can love at all is because I have first been given the gift of love by Life itself, reformulated in Christian grammar as the love of God offered in the person and work of Christ, the Arch-Son, the source of all power, and who draws me unto himself. Is so doing, Christ is made present in my relation to you; it is the coming of the me into itself in the self-revelation of Christ that reflects the coming of Life into itself in the Self of the Arch-Son—which is made manifest in my acts of mercy toward the you, the other.

It is no accident that Henry employs the sacramental vocabulary of transubstantiation to indicate the pragmatics of “doing,” which establishes the logical order of giving before loving. The eucharist elicits my recollection that I am a son of God, whose self-revelation in Christ consists of an event that gives to me life within the Son of God’s own life. The sacramental rebirth, enacted in the change of bread and wine into the substance of Christ, activates in me a transubstantiation, the substitution of “me” for the “I.” In this dramatic mutation, I substitute life’s givenness of myself in place of my self-positing inclination to assume the role of self-generator. This is a second birth, thanks to grace, that opens me to the other in giving myself to the other.<sup>30</sup>

Henry asks, in the context of the other, the relevant question: why love yourself and why love the other?<sup>31</sup> When I love you I also love myself, since we share in the selfsame generation of life in the universal self-disclosure of Life. We are given to ourselves in equal fashion in the self-giveness of Life, and therefore, we together originate in life by force of the self-giveness of the absolute Life (no one particular theological vocabulary need to be privileged here to name absolute Life; my point here is not explicitly theological).

Henry adds a crucial qualification to the passivity of myself in the self-giveness of Life. A passive “me” does not remain inoperative, but rather, designates a “faith acting through love” (Galatians 5.6). This reflects the underling logic of givenness, that I am not the author of my own acts of mercy. Hence “faith is not of the realm of consciousness, but rather of feeling. It comes from the fact that nobody ever gave himself life, but rather that life gives itself, and gives itself to the living, as what submerges him.”<sup>32</sup> The practice of mercy reveals another more primitive action within us, one “revealing itself to be that of a Son,” a gift that motivates me to assume my

<sup>27</sup> See for example Henry (2016, Part III).

<sup>28</sup> Michel Henry (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Henry (2003, p.129).

<sup>30</sup> Henry (2003, p.209). Henry discusses only briefly the eucharist in (2012a, p.156).

<sup>31</sup> Henry (2003, p.185).

<sup>32</sup> Henry (2003, p.193).

sonship in solidarity with other sons, as that which submerges us together into the perfectly reciprocal exchange of love between Son and Father, consummated in the Spirit. At the “core of each conceivable action, of the ego’s I can, there is this other acting, that of absolute Life, which reveals itself to itself by joining the ego to itself, the Arch-Revelation of Arch-generation.”<sup>33</sup> The action implied in merciful works is illustrative of giving myself to the other (involving nourishing those who are hungry, clothing those we are naked, caring for the sick), a giving rooted in a more basic gift of me to myself by Life. The manner of love communicated in these various acts of mercy has ceased to concern the performance of the self-legislating ego in any fashion; the commonality that governs ethical movement of the “me” is the forgetting of oneself.<sup>34</sup> In this life never ceases to give even as it loves, for “Life does not know rest on Sunday or Saturday....”<sup>35</sup>

Henry’s debt to a theological doctrine of birth and generation aside, we can make clear his chief point concerning the gift. Givenness marks the very origin of who we are. In turn, we give because we have first been given our identity. To remain faithful to this principle of givenness, we re-give (or re-gift) what we have been given, namely, ourselves. In giving ourselves to another, in truly releasing our nominative I, the notion of pride dissolves in the movement of loving. Since giving of myself is loving, it follows that the gift as such remains a dynamic form of giving myself to the other, for the sake of the other. I give myself in the act of giving, which is the manifestation of a “me” who loves in the act of re-giving. We love only because we have first been loved.

### 3.1 Giving as loving: the advance

Jean-Luc Marion’s work, building on Henry, represents hitherto the most formidable and brilliant phenomenological recovery of gift; in his body of work givenness lays at the root of the possibility of all manifestation, not least of the interpersonal nexus of beloveds. His analysis of the gift is equalled only by his many writings on love, in which giving and loving edify one another, as Marion envisages them as an interlocking unity.<sup>36</sup> Here I wish only to submit the briefest consideration of the priority of givenness, and, above all, giving as the movement intrinsic to love itself.

Marion treats givenness in the context of first philosophy: the phenomenon, reframed by Marion, indicates that it can disclose itself in the manner it gives itself; without giving itself, no phenomenon may yield its content within the domain of manifestation. To attach the adjective “first” to the philosophy of givenness is to acknowledge that the most basic foundation of ontology and epistemology (broadly conceived) is the movement of giving, the motion by which a thing or object or idea reveals itself according to its own mode of delivery. All other sciences or philosophies

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<sup>33</sup> Henry (2003, p.194).

<sup>34</sup> Henry (2003, p.68).

<sup>35</sup> Henry (2003 p.181).

<sup>36</sup> For excellent context and critical readings of Marion here, see Gschwandtner (2016, chapter 4); Gschwandtner, (2014, chapters 4–5); Robyn Horner (2001, chapter 5); and Horner (2016).

are second or derivative and are therefore called regional sciences. Let us say physics—it studies the physical movement of objects, their force and energy; this sub-discipline shows how objects conform to the specific and delimited criteria of mathematics or mathematically measured behaviour.<sup>37</sup> Phenomenology, in contrast, demands a more basic task to be carried out than a regional science, that we “go back to the things themselves,” as they appear in their original givenness, however and by whatever means they are given.

That is: phenomenology obeys the dictates of the phenomenon’s initiative. The thing, object, person, or idea, each is given without having recourse to any intermediary whatsoever that is different from it. The gift in Marion’s articulation, because it does not travel in a circle or loop, transcends exchange. The gift moves unilaterally out from the fold of givenness, because the given depends only on itself.

Phenomenology of givenness is a first philosophy due to the face that it has no particular kind of object or domain as its target of investigation except *givenness* as such. The movement it thereby tracks conforms to the phenomenon itself (not mathematics, to recall the above); the path of access to the phenomenon is the phenomenon, the study of which achieves a circular movement that makes phenomenology its own object.<sup>38</sup> The constitutional powers of the nominative ego or the expectations of a self-legislating subject simply block the phenomenon. To protect the integrity of givenness, then, Marion (like Henry) wholly commits to a phenomenological anthropology occasioned by the given: the nominative “I” is displaced by the dative of the “unto whom.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, it is displaced by the directly interpersonal vocative of the “me” who responds to the summons issued from the other.<sup>40</sup>

So reduced is the gift to the primitive structure of givenness, that a passive me becomes the only possible and unique signification of self. I am this irreplaceable me, but I am no longer properly speaking a “self” or an “I.” That title belongs to the given. If I exist at all, it is only as a dative, a living reference or screen who submits to, and is shaped by, the beckoning of the phenomenon; I am in this interchange assigned to see the world from its point of view, where my place is defined wholly in relation to the phenomenon’s angle of entry. Disposed to the phenomenon, then, Marion portrays the privilege of givenness as a principle the interprets the gift not as an object reified as a static thing, but as an agency that gives itself just as it unfolds from itself. The gift in principle must be gratuitous and unanticipated, where expectation finds no constitutive role. Givenness, therefore, involves no conditions, no exchange, and thus, no circularity of debt.

Marion’s analysis has sought “at nothing if not to describe how and how far, in the appearing, the initiative belongs in principle to the phenomenon, not the gaze... The self of what shows itself and gives itself can never be verified through inference or constitution, which would collapse it equally into the in-itself of the object.

<sup>37</sup> See Marion (2002).

<sup>38</sup> The insight that phenomenology is essentially its own object of investigation is drawn from Henry (1973, pp.55–60).

<sup>39</sup> Marion (2003, pp.159 and 249).

<sup>40</sup> Marion (2007, p.106).

The *self* of the phenomenon is marked in its determination as event. It comes, does *its* thing, and leaves on its own. Showing *itself*, it also shows the *self* that takes the initiative of giving *itself* [Le *soi* du phénomène se marque dans sa détermination d'événement: il vient, survient et part de lui-même et, *se* montrant, il montre aussi le *soi* qui prend (ou retire) l'initiative de se donner].<sup>41</sup> One may challenge, in the spirit of Steinbock, that the withdrawal of the self (or displacing it onto the phenomenon) into the domain of radical passivity prohibits the “me” from assuming the responsibility to which loves calls us: to accompany the other in vigilant and attentive acceptance.

Vigilant love, I wish to argue, follows from or supervenes on giving, only so that giving remains the constitutive component of the action of loving. That is precisely the point of Marion's analysis of the passivity of the “Lover” in *The Erotic Phenomenon* (§§15–21). The “me” to whom Marion allocates the title of “vocative,” subsists as a lover precisely because the “me” is disposed to the other in vulnerability. Humble love elevates the other so that the “me” grows in awareness and comprehension of the other's needs, perspective, and lifeworld. Pride and egoism would experience the other as but a mirror who reflects my “I.” That is, the tyranny of the I is apparent in that the match between subject and the other is accomplished when the other's manifestation provides full validation of the subject's conceptual scheme that is outlined beforehand. The operation of the “advance” in Marion does not tolerate first-person pride or the calculus of the nominative ego.

Loving begins and ends with giving, or, by taking the initiative to advance toward the other. Giving takes the initiative, and thus runs the risk of first exposure, a movement Marion denominates with the purposefully erotic vocabulary of the “advance.” The “me” in giving itself as amorous surrenders to “you” without at the same time making a demand that you acquiesce to my presence.<sup>42</sup> While I may not consummate my advance with you in the form of a concrete relationship, I must nevertheless make myself available by giving myself. Giving opens up loving; and loving remains giving in the exchange of beloveds to the extent that the vulnerability of the “advance” opens up the space required for me to love in vigilance. In the advance I make myself available, I risk myself in the hope that you will give to me my very self.<sup>43</sup> I have become sufficiently exposed to you so that you have an advantage over me. Thus the “passivity [of my advance provokes] your activity, not the inverse.”<sup>44</sup> The dative or vocative, a position grounded in the advance, formulates the grammatical declension of the privilege of givenness.

Marion's phenomenology, of course, has attracted theological readings that only a philosopher of religion of his calibre could enjoy. His work on Augustine resituates the gift fully within the prior givenness of the world in the doctrine of creation.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Marion (2003, p.159); for the French rendition, see Marion, (2013, p.226).

<sup>42</sup> Marion (2007, p.111).

<sup>43</sup> You give me my flesh or my sense of concrete interiority when we meet in a mutual advance. See Marion (2007, §§ 22–28).

<sup>44</sup> Marion (2007, p.113).

<sup>45</sup> One commentator names the tendency for the whole discourse on the gift to veer into theological terrain a kind of “theomania,” which involves clear metaphysical assumptions that introduce an unnecessary leap. I accept that metaphysics underlies Marion's and Henry's thematization of original givenness, but I do not conclude this to represent an excessive hermeneutic, as if a neutral, metaphysics-free version were

This is just one theological perspective among other valid theological and non-theological perspectives on the gift. His early work on God offers a sustained rereading of divine love as original gift, which denotes a first draft of the “advance”: To wit: “Love loves without condition, simply because it loves; [God] thus loves without limit or restriction. No refusal rebuffs or limits that which, in order to give itself, does not await the least welcome or require the least consideration. Which means, moreover, that as interlocutor of love, man does not first have to pretend to arrange a “divine abode” for it-supposing that this very pretension may be sustained-but purely and simply to accept it.”<sup>46</sup> Giving and loving (again the theological vocabulary can be contextualized here) elide into one other, and this may well be exactly how giving and loving dovetail and ultimately integrate one with the other. That is, giving “does not await the least welcome,” which reformulates love as a giving “without limit or restriction.” Giving and loving move simultaneously one with the other, in humility and vulnerability, toward the other.

Augustine, to whom Marion is indebted (i.e. influenced by) discusses at length in the final book (book XV) of *De Trinitate* the definition of the gift, another name for the Holy Spirit. Giving and loving interlock in this theological context. In fact the “Spirit is specially called the Gift for no other reason except love.”<sup>47</sup> It expresses the love shared between Father and Son, which is then given to us a desire (inflamm) for the other: “When God the Holy Spirit, therefore, who proceeds from God, has been given to man, He inflames him with the love for God and his neighbour, and He Himself is love. For man does not have whence to love God, except from God.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, “There are many other testimonies of the Scriptures, which unanimously attest that the Gift of God is the Holy Spirit, inasmuch as He is given to those who love God through Him.”<sup>49</sup> Giving allows love, but the gift of the Spirit generates at every turn the love of God and neighbour through that gift, accomplished through that everlasting vertical donation.

#### 4 Conclusion: giving in love

I should like to conclude with a poem entitled “Love” by Czeslaw Milosz:

Love means to learn to look at yourself  
 The way one looks at distant things  
 For you are only one thing among many.  
 And whoever sees that way heals his heart,  
 Without knowing it, from various ills-

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Footnote 45 (continued)

available (despite Marion’s protests). For more on this interesting, if extreme, critique, see Eliot R. Wolfson (2014, chapters 1–2).

<sup>46</sup> Marion (2012, p.47).

<sup>47</sup> Augustine (2002, p.203).

<sup>48</sup> Augustine (2002, p.203).

<sup>49</sup> Augustine (2002, p.207).

A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.  
Then he wants to use himself and things  
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.  
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves:  
Who serves best doesn't always understand.<sup>50</sup>

I have suggested, in part two above, that Steinbock's thesis advances the debate concerning the gift by charting a path between impersonal exchange and passive withdrawal, both of which converge on the same vice or moral deficit, namely, the pride of clinging to oneself for the sake of oneself. The "vigilant love" into which the gift passes, again for Steinbock, bids adieu to the gift as such, if we mean by gift an "object" we exchange. While I do not categorize Steinbock under the rubric of "exchange theorists," his work nevertheless demands reciprocity between lover and beloved, and so, on this basis, the exchange-theory finds a restatement here: "The gift is not the point because the gift only becomes the gift in the context of interpersonal loving. From a different angle, the gift becomes a gift in humility, which is how we receive ourselves in loving."<sup>51</sup> Exchange echoes in the mutuality involved in interpersonal loving as Steinbock conceives it.

Steinbock also prioritizes interpersonal loving as an act of mutual humility. But humility is rarely mutual, but the poverty of spirit cultivates such humble gift giving: "It will be necessary eventually to requalify the gifted as the *beloved* (as "given" through the *revelation* of loving). But for now let me ask: Can we or to what extent can we (actively) submit our activity to passivity? Can *we* accomplish the self-denial and attenuation of the self so that what gives itself can show itself? Or instead, cannot the self-disposal be accomplished only by an "other" whom I serve? Is it not by being occupied by another—in religious experience, by God; in moral experience, by the other person; in aesthetic experience, by, for example, the dance or the sand castle at the beach—that the self is called into question, and only in this way? Is there perhaps something we can do to dispose ourselves to allow what gives itself to show itself, or in other words, to rescind the Decision? In my view, this would have to take place through a different kind of poverty, what the mystics call the "*poverty of spirit*."<sup>52</sup> Here a humble advance toward the other, while it hopes for an exchange, the reality is that giving-as-loving does not demand it. True poverty permits the other to be given just as the other is given. Agency and passivity do not interlock in opposition: the worry about self-attenuation need not dominate the present discussion since the advance or the move intends to re-give what I have been given invokes "my" agency, an active disposition enacted toward the other, for the other, and in spirit of the other.

Hence I challenged, in part three, the claim that passivity must necessarily oppose agency and the "vigilant" accompaniment of loving. Giving tracks the advance toward the other that remains at once vulnerable to and inviting of the other. True: giving develops a love that dilates the soul, for it creates distance from oneself, so

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<sup>50</sup> Milosz, "Love," in (2002, p.50).

<sup>51</sup> Steinbock (2018, p.6).

<sup>52</sup> Steinbock (2018, p.109).

that I look at myself “the way one looks at distant things.” Giving myself in the advance tells me that I am only one thing among many. I still love myself, precisely because I still look at myself in humility. Hence, in principle, love prohibits that I collapse upon myself, for the inwardness of pride runs directly counter to the outward course of love.

The “how” of the advance can make all the difference and thus clear the ground for loving mutuality and non-obligatory reciprocity (which I am persuaded is the position of Steinbock, a thesis I wish to throw into sharper relief); the non-indifference of the gift of myself to the neighbour overcomes the impulse to halt giving at the level of a mere gesture of hospitality. It must move according to a rhythm of Steinbock’s (after the mystics he says) notion of the “poverty of spirit,” but also beyond that as well, if the context invokes a further movement. As Levinas should demand of his readers, giving requires as a norm the self-reflexivity of humility, “the gift of being torn up” [*le don douloureusement arraché*]<sup>53</sup> is a form of giving nonetheless, wherein I bestow to the other the gift of “my own skin”<sup>54</sup> if that be necessary. Should we replace the violent language of Levinas with the subtler language of Augustine, we can explore how in giving the “me” expands and dilates, in order not to tear itself for the other, but to stretch itself to occupy space with the other (leaving stretch marks).

Henry and Marion, I emphasised in part three, also declined the “I” into a “me,” a passive “unto whom” that receives itself from what gives itself, an original givenness that prompts and motivates my repertoire of gift-giving. I love because I give, and what I give is love (my own skin bears stretch marks) that I have received from those to whom I am a recipient. I cannot be blamed if the love is not consummated or received by the other. What I can achieve in love is illumination of the other, so that in my advance she “stands in the glow of ripeness” (Milosz).

Love cannot function in isolation, as if it is static and motionless. What does love love when it loves? It loves itself; “but unless it loves itself as loving something, then it does not love itself as love.” That is, love intends to love the other when it loves. Or: love inherently moves within an interpersonal nexus that Augustine calls brotherly love. “When we love our brother from love, we love our brother from God. He must needs love love who loves his brother.”<sup>55</sup> And from Life’s original self-givenness, I practice the advance of giving in forgetting myself as a self-positing “I.” The accomplishment of love lies in the conversion to, and growth into, a “me,” in which I love in giving, by expanding myself, even if I do not receive back sometimes but scorn or cold indifference. Giving does not resent scorn, because in giving I see myself from a distance, and whoever “sees himself in this way heals his heart,” in other words, is enabled to grow in and be enlarged by love.

<sup>53</sup> Levinas (1998, p.74).

<sup>54</sup> Levinas (1998, p.138).

<sup>55</sup> Augustine (2002, pp.20–21).



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