

On the Ethics of the Gift: Acknowledgment and Response

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The essays that make up this issue are designed to pay tribute to the philosophical career of Gary B. Madison. The numerous books and articles that Professor Madison has published during his illustrious career, a career that has not ended with his retirement from academe, range over all the significant topics in twentieth-century Continental philosophy. He has addressed issues that have come to the fore in the developments of existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, structuralism, and postmodernism. But he has never remained content to be a chronicler of the mosaic of positions that have been presented in the history of recent thought. Throughout his writings one is able to discern a creative and philosophically imaginative coming to terms with the pressing issues of ethics and political economy that impact upon the crises of our social existence. Nowhere is this more evident than in his recent monumental work, *The Political Economy of Civil Society and Human Rights*.¹

In this book Madison has succeeded in consolidating his reflections on civil society and human rights into a treatise on social philosophy that will merit the attention of scholars in the discipline for years to come. With a remarkable breadth of knowledge in the history of social and political thought, from the ancients to the postmoderns, coupled with an incisive and critical mind, Madison addresses the central issues of the topic with both clarity and depth. The central achievement of the work is a retrieval of the idea of civil society—an idea which has a quite illustrious history but which has fallen on bad times of late. Madison is able to rescue the concept from its accumulated distortions and reconfigure it by fleshing out its multiple ramifications. His systematic and closely reasoned analysis leads him into the interdependent spheres of the moral-cultural, the political, and the economic. Essentially an exercise in cultural hermeneutics, the work presents what he himself has appropriately called “an overall *interpretive account* of the social world.” Although addressing some of the more technical features of economic and political dynamics, the discussion nonetheless remains squarely centered on a reflection on the human condition and the implications of such a reflection for the future of moral philosophy.

There can be no doubt that Madison’s legacy to philosophers of the new millennium will include challenging perspectives on the role of social philosophy and the function of social and cultural critique. Our task in the present essay is to develop an aspect of the complex of issues to which Madison has called our attention, and particularly in his most recent works.

We have chosen to focus our attention on the ethics of the gift, experimenting with a particular take on how the gift might play itself out in what Madison has suggestively named “the political economy of civil society and human rights.”

It was Marcel Mauss in his celebrated essay, *Essai sur le don*, who placed the gift at the center of socio-economic transactions, distinguishing gift giving from the exchange of goods and services in market-modeled societies. He saw the “exchange” of gifts as a social catalyst that leavened the consumerism of modern capitalism. This leavening, however, was not designed to obliterate private property and the forces of production and consumption, distribution and exchange; rather, it provided a measure of moderation to the rampant accumulation of wealth in immoderate market societies. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a few decades earlier, made explicit the connection of the gift with ethics in his examination of the problems that travel with gift giving as the principal virtue (*die schenkende Tugend*) that informs the dynamics of self-realization. It was Jacques Derrida who in his book, *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*, radicalized Mauss’s economics of the gift and Nietzsche’s ethics of the gift to the juncture at which they congeal into an aporia of gift giving as an impossibility. In the moment a gift is given it succumbs to an interplay of exchange relations. Strictly speaking, therefore, a gift can never be given, nor can it ever be received.

Our task here is to domesticate Derrida’s construal of the aporia of gift giving by attenuating its infinitizing tendencies, explicating its efficacy in the domicile, the economy, of communicative practices within civil society. In doing so we are searching for a species of a “logic” of the gift that will return us to a more originaive notion of the logos, out of which logic itself has developed and on which its restricted economy continues to depend. The resources of the logos might enable an understanding of some of the aporetic features of the gift. To understand an aporia is already to move beyond it. An understood aporia needs to be distinguished from an aporia as an impenetrable surd.

In addressing the issues at hand one can begin to clear the path of thinking that lies ahead with a clarification of the conditions that give rise to the aporia of the gift, conditions having to do with the semantic interplay of excess and expenditure, possession and dispossession, surplus and squandering, having and giving—all of which set the stage for the catapulting of the gift into an economy of exchange relations. Against the backdrop of such a constellation of exchange relations, the ethic of gift giving, as Nietzsche had already acutely observed, degenerates into an ethic of enslavement, a “slave morality” in which the receiver of the gift is obligated to give something in exchange and is threatened with guilt if s/he

fails to do so. Correspondingly, the giver of the gift violates the purity of the gift by expecting something in return, and above all a recognition of the virtuous activity that s/he has performed. It is thus that gift giving gravitates into a spiraling vortex of accumulation and expenditure, acquisition of debt and repayment.

It would indeed appear that the very conditions for gift giving and gift receiving reside within a matrix of social relations based on the accumulation of wealth and the institution of private ownership. To be able to dispossess oneself of something presupposes a condition of prior possession or ownership. One cannot dispossess without first possessing. Gift giving would thus seem to find its foundation in an economy of production and exchange relations, wherewith only those who are privileged by ownership of private property are able truly to give. Objects need first to be produced, exchanged, and distributed before they can be given away.²

Within the ethical economy of virtues, duties, and rights a similar set of circumstances seems to unfold. If gift giving is the performance of a virtuous act, reaching a crowning fulfillment in self-sacrifice, the giving of myself for the welfare of another, I need to be in possession of that virtuous trait or quality that I now freely give to the other. The moral task thus becomes that of accumulating as many moral traits as possible, defining one's identity through a possession of surplus virtue, and then perfecting the moral life through a dispossession of that which one has in excess. The moral life in civil society thus becomes as much a victim of consumerism as is one's socioeconomic existence. The challenge thus becomes that of liberating the gift, the giving and receiving of gifts, from the restricted economics that govern our social and ethical life. Meeting this challenge will require that we pay particular attention to the dynamics of acknowledgment and response in the phenomenon of the gift as an event in the discourse and action that make up our communicative praxis.

To acknowledge the gift as gift, both in its being given and its being received, is to attest to an alterity that transcends the categories of both ownership and moral intent. In this regard, the gift is without origin—at least without origin in the realm of our mundane sociocultural existence. The principal mistake of those who analyze the gift back into a framework of excess and expenditure, possession and dispossession, privileging the private over the public, is to fail to acknowledge that objects that are given as gifts never issue from a zero-point origin of absolute ownership. Indeed, the very meaning of "ownership" becomes problematized in the event of the gift. The grammar of "custodian" and "steward" may be more appropriate than is "owner" for characterizing the phenomenon at issue. The goods of the earth and the services of humankind can indeed become "privatized," but before doing so they transcend the claims for property

rights and personal ownership. To give a gift is to acknowledge a facticity of pre-existent goods and values, antedating their distribution in the artificially constructed private and public spheres.

But it is precisely this acknowledgment in the comprehension of the gift as a gift, in the understanding of the act by which something is freely given, either an object or indeed oneself in an act of service or sacrifice, that requires explication. In the end, to comprehend the gift as a gift is to understand the dynamics of intersubjectivity between donor and recipient, to understand the presence of the other than self as the giver and the self present to itself as receiver of the gift. It is this acknowledgment that comprises the peculiar logic of the gift. But is there not a danger in speaking of the "logic" of the gift, inviting a slippage into an economy of gift exchange governed by rules that specify relations of identity and reciprocity, demands for consistency, and mechanisms for proper distribution? It would seem that it is a very peculiar "logic" that is at issue, possibly like the "logic of practice" in Pierre Bourdieu's influential book by that name in which gift giving does not follow the social rules of commodity exchange. Without as such disparaging the role and function of logic, it may be less misleading to speak of the "logos of the gift," in which the relation between the logos and logic takes on a new configuration.

The logos, as the structure of meaning in the gift as an intersubjective event, proceeds by way of an acknowledgment that comports a "knowledge" of self and other in the gift-giving and gift-receiving venture. This acknowledgment is borne by an interpretive understanding, and hence is hermeneutical through and through. We are thus disposed to speak of a hermeneutic of acknowledgment, and we need to distinguish (although not radically separate) it from an epistemology of recognition.

As is well known, it was Hegel who found a prominent place for acknowledgment in his dialectic of self-consciousness and consciousness of the other self. "Self-consciousness is in and for itself by virtue of its being for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it occurs only by being acknowledged."³ However, Hegel's concrete existential dialectic of self-knowledge as acknowledgment of the other appeared destined to be translated into the abstract epistemology of recognition of modernity. Admittedly, Hegel himself was partly responsible for this translation, and particularly as a result of his later efforts to erect a subject-centered edifice of absolute knowledge. Yet it is vital to retain the distinctions between hermeneutics and epistemology, acknowledgment and recognition, logos and logic, so as not to have the one facetily collapse into the other.

An epistemology of recognition, governed by the rules of logic, either formal or transcendental, yearns for a representation of objectifiable contents. Sensory percepts are synthesized with organizing concepts via

rules of inference designed to deliver a representation that is deemed to be constitutive of knowledge. This somewhat intricate epistemological apparatus (which was most profoundly defined by Kant) is constructed in advance of the event of knowing. The criteria of what can count as knowledge are laid out before the upsurge of the event of knowledge. A hermeneutics of acknowledgment, which is older than an epistemology of recognition, proceeds via an interpretive decipherment of the dialectic of self and other, as this decipherment is borne by an incursive disclosure of the other as the occasion for a dynamics of mutual acknowledgment. There is an intersubjective encounter and transaction that antedates the epistemological scaffolding of an interior subject bent upon representing an exterior object.⁴

It is this dynamics of acknowledgment that informs the logos of the gift, prior to its objectification within the economy of logic as a basis for traditional epistemology. The dynamics of gift giving and gift receiving requires for its comprehension an acknowledgment of the incursion of the other on the hither side of the restricted economy of distribution and exchange, possession and dispossession, reserve and dissemination, excess and squandering. The gift, to be truly a gift, contains no expectation of return, neither a return of that which is similar nor of that which is different. To acknowledge a gift as gift is to attest to it as being freely given, neither as an expenditure of an excess that the giver might possess nor as a virtuous act within the requirements of reciprocity. This is why the giving and receiving of gifts are such perilous undertakings. It was Nietzsche in particular who alerted his readers to the peril of giving. Even the "thank you" required by the rules of etiquette violates the purity of the gift as gift in that it signals a recognition that a virtuous activity has been performed by the giver, who is able to exercise his sovereignty over the recipient, keeping him within the bounds of a slave morality.⁵

Yet one of the central points of our current project has to do with the incarnation of the gift in the economy of civil society. Hence the title of our project: "The Ethics of the Gift." The logos of the gift as acknowledgment and attestation takes on the flesh of ethical responsibility. Herein resides the paradox of gift giving in civil society. To address this paradox one needs to couple acknowledgment and response. The implied ethic is an ethic of responsibility, that which in a previous work we have called an ethic of the fitting response. Against the backdrop of the event of gift giving, such an ethic of the fitting response translates into an ethic of care or, even more pointedly, an ethic of love.

Of all the philosophers of the twentieth century, pointing the way to the new millennium, no one has more poignantly called our attention to the aporia that resides at the heart of the ethical task than has Emmanuel

Levinas. As the philosopher of absolute exteriority and radical transcendence, locating the ethical requirement in ruminations on that which is "otherwise than being," revolting against all philosophies of identity in his celebration of difference, abjuring all relations of reciprocity and distributive justice in heeding the call of the other, Levinas has posed the question about morality and civil society in a manner that is at once profound and perplexing. How can one acknowledge the visage and call of that which is wholly other, outside the reciprocal relations of the economy of distributive justice, and respond to the ethical claims that arise in civil society? Where is the space of response and responsibility in an ethic of absolute exteriority?

As is well known, to deal precisely with this issue Hegel found it necessary to construct a philosophy of identity so as to account for the ingression of transcendent morality into the fabric of civil society. The story of Hegel's philosophy of identity is a story of the *mediation* of the transcendent and universal with the immanent and particular. The religious symbol of the incarnation thus becomes for Hegel the decisive indicator of a realized eschatology. The absolute exteriority, to which Levinas time and again calls our attention, undergoes a radical transmutation and becomes efficacious within the depths of an interiority where any estrangement between self and other is overcome through a mutual acknowledgment.

If it is indeed the case that Levinas with his philosophy of alterity, absolute exteriority, and asymmetry, and Hegel with his philosophy of identity, mediation, and consummate reciprocity, mark out the parameters of our discourse on the ethics of the gift within civil society, then our requirement clearly becomes that of splitting the difference. Against Levinas, while acknowledging a robust transcendence of the address by the other and a continuing reminder that the Kingdom of God has not yet come, placing the epiphany of justice into the future as an event which is to unfold only in the fullness of time, we nonetheless attest to a goodness that can happen here and now in our concrete personal and social existence, and that although the Kingdom of God has not yet come it has already begun to come. Against Hegel, while acknowledging the importance of his emphasis on the incarnation of the transcendent logos in the theater of historical becoming and the implications of this for our ethical existence in civil society, we nonetheless reject his overtures to a philosophy of identity and the accompanying realized eschatology.

It is precisely our take on the ethics of the gift that governs this splitting of the difference. The initiation of the gift resides on the hither side of the restricted economies of our public existence. Hence, we attest to its alterity. But the gift, to become a genuine gift, requires an acknowledgment and response on the part of the receiver of the gift. It is this coupling of

acknowledgment and response that comprises what we have come to call the *proto-ethics* of the gift and, more specifically, the proto-ethics of a communicative praxis that first provides the space for a genealogy of the ethical subject and the delineation of moral imperatives.

This is a "proto-ethics" because it is older than the edifices of ethical theory that have defined the field of ethics as a special discipline in the history of philosophy. Responding to the gift is responding to an event that translates into an "ethic" of the fitting response, a response that acknowledges constellations of prior thought and action. But this should not be construed as simply yet another ethical theory, alongside teleological, deontological, and utilitarian ethical theories. The basic questions at issue in discourse about the gift are proto-ethical in character—questions such as "Who is the giver of the gift?", "How are we to understand 'giving' and 'receiving?'", "What messages are sent in gift giving?", "What forces of self-constitution and self-identity are at work in giving a gift?", "What are the prior constellations of speech and action to which an action might be deemed an appropriate or fitting response?" These questions are prior to questions about the particularized ends, duties, rights, and goods within the economy of civil society. In this proto-ethical stance there is not only what Kierkegaard had already called a "teleological suspension of the ethical," there is also a deontological suspension of the ethical, a utilitarian suspension of the ethical—indeed a suspension of the preoccupation with the panoply of ends, duties, rights, and personal and societal goods, all of which are governed by the exchange relations that arise out of requirements for reciprocity and a distributive justice that defines the ethical economy of civil society.

This, however, is not to abjure questions having to do with the conditions of symmetry and reciprocity and the requirement for administering justice and assigning duties and rights. But before I ask the questions, "What is my telos?", "What is my duty?", "What are my rights?", and "What is the social good?", I need to ask what is going on in the wider scheme of things that solicits my fitting response? When the matter at issue is the acknowledgment of a gift that antedates my thought and action and which expects nothing in return, the difficult task is that of maintaining a span of tension between the proto-ethical aneconomic event and the requirements for ethical life in civil society. After the requirements in our quotidian social existence are suspended, enabling us to acknowledge the alterity and asymmetry of gift giving, they then return and assume their role in the establishment of the various forms of social interaction. But they do not return in the same way in which they were operative before their suspension. We continue to draw up policies of fairness and justice, rights and goods, duties and obligations, but we do not draw them up in the same

way. These policies are now transfigured and transvalued by virtue of a gift giving that transcends and relativizes the particularized claims and constructs of ethical theory.

These policies, transfigured and transvalued by the aneconomic event of the gift, are now able to provide certain directives for shaping the institutions of social justice within civil society and in some manner or another inform the political goals of participatory democracy. But specifically how these directives might be implemented and how the political goals might be achieved is precisely the proverbial bugbear. The gift, whose proper locus and origin is in a world beyond economy, will need to make its presence felt in the finite world of mundane culture spheres. It is here that numerous obstacles will have to be overcome, new interpretations forged, and the resources for a reclamation of our heritage and the wider tradition brought to a formidable test.

Derrida, in his provocative work, *The Politics of Friendship*, has addressed some of the main issues at stake in our topic. He sets the issues against the backdrop of the entwinement of the concepts of gift, friendship, and politics as these concepts auger for the future of democracy. He finds it particularly distressing that the concept of friendship has become so closely allied with the concept of fraternity in the history of social and political thought, inviting an exclusionary democracy of "fraternal friendship," in which feminine and heterosexual friendships become marginalized. What is so desperately needed, according to Derrida, is a radically new notion of friendship, one that can successfully integrate virtue, justice, and political reason into a more vibrant and more inclusive democracy.

But such a project and goal, Derrida cautions, is not easily attainable. "Is it possible to think and to implement democracy, that which would keep the old name 'democracy,' while uprooting from it all these figures of friendship (philosophical and religious) which prescribe fraternity: the family and the androcentric ethnic group?"⁶ Clearly, to implement such a democracy the range and reach of friendship will need to be widened to move beyond all homo-fraternal confines; it will need to include the sorority of wives and widows, single mothers, lesbian and heterosexual partners. But there is an even more grievous impediment that stands in the way of implementing such a vibrant and inclusive democracy, and this impediment turns on certain inherent limitations within the concept of friendship itself. Nowhere does this become more evident than when one's attention is turned to the aporia within the interstices of the connection of friendship and the gift.

The gift of friendship still operates within the parameters of a restricted economy. This was already discernible in the Greek concept of friendship as *philia*, which is based upon a requirement for reciprocity. *Philia* is a love

that expects something commensurate in return and is possible only between equals. One cannot be a friend to everyone. One has friends, says Aristotle, so that one can find in them qualities of character with which one can identify and which contribute to a reciprocating fulfillment. Friendship requires an interaction with equals, borne by relations of symmetry and reciprocity, wherewith to achieve a mutual perfectibility of virtue on the path to self-realization. It is not surprising that this aristocratic ideal, which permeated so much of Greek thought, should also figure in the Greek concept of friendship and consequently tip the scales toward aristocracy rather than democracy. To proceed even further, and speak of being friends with one's enemies would be a blatant oxymoron for the Greek mind.

It was thus, avers Derrida, that the Christian doctrine of love, as expressed in the Gospels, appeared on the scene as an affront to the Greek ideal, at once transforming the notion of fraternity into universal brotherhood and setting the requirement to love even one's enemies. "One becomes a brother, in Christianity, one is worthy of the eternal father, only by loving one's enemy as one's neighbor or as oneself." Here the gift of love, transcending all economies of exchange relations, is somehow to be made efficacious in the dealings of civil society. "One would thus have to think the dissymmetry of a gift without exchange, therefore an infinite one infinitely disproportionate, in any case, however modest it may be, from the vantage point of terrestrial finitude."⁷ It is at this juncture that the very concept of Christian love would appear as an impossible ideal and any implications of it for the economies of civil society quite unthinkable.

Probably no philosopher in the history of Christian thought has agonized more over this issue posed by Derrida than has Kierkegaard. It is particularly in his thought-provoking treatise, *Works of Love*, that the issue comes to the foreground. Setting his format against the backdrop of the New Testament injunction, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," Kierkegaard carries through a continuing hermeneutic on the entwinement of "neighbor," "love," "you shall," and "as yourself." What we learn from this is, first, that the concept of the neighbor is universalized as the other self that is nearby.

Every human being is the neighbor. In being king, beggar, rich man, poor man, male, female, etc., we are not like each other—therein we are indeed different. But in being the neighbor we are all unconditionally like each other. Dissimilarity is temporality's method of confusing that marks every human being differently, but the neighbor is eternity's mark—on every human being.⁸

We also learn from the commandment that the quality of love at issue

extends beyond the friend/enemy distinction. My enemy is also one who is "nearby," and by his presence he solicits my love as much as does my friend.

Therefore the one who truly loves the neighbor loves also his enemy. The distinction *friend* or *enemy* is difference in the object of love, but love for the neighbor has the object that is without difference. The neighbor is the utterly unrecognizable dissimilarity between persons or is the eternal equality before God—the enemy, too, has this equality.⁹

It is clearly this type of love to which Derrida refers when he speaks of the "dissymmetry of a gift without exchange" and of the gift as being "infinitely disproportionate ... from the vantage point of terrestrial finitude." Or again, in the words of Kierkegaard: "The inwardness of love must be self-sacrificing and therefore without requirement of any reward.... It has no reward, not even that of being loved."¹⁰

It is this accentuation of love as a gift without exchange, as a love that seeks no reward, that provides the backdrop for Kierkegaard's rather firm distinction between sensual or erotic love and friendship on the one hand and on the other hand the love of one's neighbor.

The object of both erotic love and of friendship has preference's name, 'the beloved,' 'the friend,' who is loved in contrast to the whole world. The Christian doctrine, on the contrary, is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion.... Erotic love (*Elskov*) is defined by the object; friendship is defined by the object; only love for the neighbor is defined by love (*Kjerlighed*).¹¹

What is in play in Kierkegaard's hermeneutical typology of the different kinds of love is a set of distinctions that reverts back to both early Greek and early Christian thought. Greek language and thought contributed the distinctions between *philia*, *eros*, and *epithymia*—all forms of love, to be sure, and all defined by their objects, although their objects remain differentiated.

Philia is love of a friend; *eros*, as portrayed in Plato's *Symposium*, is love of the eternal form of beauty; and *epithymia* is sensual love. In subsequent usage, *eros* and *epithymia* became closely allied, and it is this alliance that is at issue when Kierkegaard writes of "erotic love." But the principal point at this juncture turns on the characterization of both *eros* and *philia* as

forms of love within the economy of exchange relations. Symmetry and reciprocity are conditions for their fruition and their continuance. They are preferential, possessive, and conditional. As such, they are to be contrasted with what in the New Testament was named *agapé*, later translated into the Latin *caritas* which became the touchstone for Saint Augustine's doctrine of ethics. It is within this historical context that Kierkegaard's explication of the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," needs to be understood. Here one is indeed dealing with love as a giving without return, abridging the rules of symmetry and reciprocity, a love that is nonpreferential, nonpossessive, and unconditional, a love that loves for the sake of loving and is indeed able to love *in spite of* being unrequited.

Such a love, in the guise of a gift that expects nothing in return, outside the bounds of the economy of reciprocal social transactions, indeed strikes one as an impossible ideal, something beyond the ken of our human, all too human preoccupations and concerns. To expect from this impossible ideal certain moral imperatives for the attainment of justice in civil society surely would appear to be a utopian dream that can have no bearing on the political demands of our age. There is a sense in which both Kierkegaard and Derrida would grant, although from somewhat different perspectives, the impossibility of that which they have so eloquently described in their discourses on the gift. Indeed, Derrida repeatedly makes much of the impossibility of the gift, the giving of the gift containing the dynamics of its own destruction, being annihilated as a gift in the moment that it is given and received.

It is thus that the application of the gift, and here more precisely the gift of love without return, to political life becomes particularly problematic. Here any "politics of friendship" clearly comes up short, and if there is going to be any talk about a democracy leavened by the gift it will need to be a democracy of the future.

For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept.¹²

The incarnation of the gift, the gift of friendship and the gift of love, into the economy of civil society thus finds its fulfillment (if indeed one can talk of fulfillment here) in an eschatological vision rather than in a political platform geared to the construction and implementation of institutional models recovered from the past. Democracy, and the justice that under-

girds it, is yet to come—and indeed always yet to come.

On this particular point it is difficult to find a basic disagreement between Derrida and Kierkegaard. They both project the fulfillment of the command to love one's neighbor and the realization of justice in civil society into the future. The Kingdom of God indeed has not yet arrived. In the thought of both, a paradox resides in the very heart of the aneconomic gift of love that expects nothing in return, a paradox that results from the gulf that separates the face and the voice of the infinite from the resources of the finite self. They both illustrate an existential passion for the application of the infinite demand in the economy of public affairs, transcending ethnic, racial, and gender differences. Kierkegaard makes much of "our duty to love the people we see" as an injunction that follows directly from the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself; he repeatedly emphasizes the point that love knows no preference in our dealings with the rich and the poor, the exalted and the lowly, the healthy and the infirm, the male and the female, or even the friend and the enemy.

But how can a wholly transcendent and aneconomic gift impact on the finite and economic plane of existence? How can the "works of love" become effectual in the transactions of personal and social life? Herein lies the rub, one might say. To address this issue, which is indeed an issue that reaches far back into both the philosophical and theological traditions of Western thought, antedating the insights on the subject that Kierkegaard and Derrida have provided, we suggest a thought experiment on "eschatological pre-enactment." As already noted, for Kierkegaard and Derrida alike, the matter of thought at issue requires an eschatological perspective. Traveling a patch of road together with these two provocative hermeneuticists, we propose the notion of eschatological pre-enactment, a pre-enacted eschatology, to provide the proto-ethical dimension that supplies the dynamic of the ethic of the gift as it relates to the requirement of the fitting response.

Pre-enacted eschatology avoids the pitfalls of a realized eschatology that issues from a philosophy of identity and radical interiority (Hegel) as well as those of a wholly transcendent eschatology that proceeds from a philosophy of difference and absolute exteriority (Levinas). The Kingdom of God has neither enjoyed fulfillment in the economy of civil society nor does it remain wholly exterior and transcendent to it. The Kingdom of God has not yet come—but it has already begun to come. This is how one needs to split the difference between the Jewish and the Christian views on the messianic consciousness. The Kingdom has begun to come in the workings of the gift, the "works of love," workings that disclose a utopian ideality that intersects the temporal economy of historical becoming. That is why Kierkegaard insists on the actional component of love. "Christian love is

sheer action," he writes. The very title of his book on the subject, *Works of Love*, testifies to the need to translate love into "works." Love is action; but also, continues Kierkegaard, "love hopes all things." Providing a commentary on I Corinthians, Kierkegaard explicates the internal connection of love with hope. "But love, which is greater than faith and hope, also takes upon itself the work of hope, or takes upon itself hope, hoping for others, as a work."¹³

Love thus binds together a working or acting with a hoping or anticipating. Love takes on an eschatological orientation. It is always projected into the future. But this hoping, Kierkegaard points out, is never a simple wishing, craving, or expecting, all of which are empirical and time-bound states of mind. Hope testifies to the power of the possible to transform and transfigure the restricted economy of temporal desires that remain within the sphere of exchange relations.

To hope relates to the future, to possibility, which in turn, unlike actuality, is always a duality, the possibility of advance or of retrogression, of rising or falling, of good or of evil. The eternal *is*, but when the eternal touches the temporal or is in the temporal, they do not meet each other in the *present*, because in that case the present would itself be the eternal. The present, the moment, is over so quickly that it actually does not exist; it is only the boundary and therefore is past, whereas the past is what was present. Therefore, when the eternal is in the temporal, it is in the future ... or in possibility. The past is the actual, the future is the possible; eternally, the eternal is the eternal; in time, the eternal is the possible, the future.¹⁴

In performing works of love the eternal, the possible, and the future become entwined; and it is by dint of a projection into the future that the transcendent love of neighbor can be pre-enacted. This pre-enactment of that which always in its fullness of realization resides in the future takes shape in the form of the fitting response.

The fitting response, using the measure of the gift of love, responds by excavating a space for that which *can be done*, concretely expressed in random acts of kindness, in which one exemplifies the virtuous deed of a Good Samaritan, as well as in collaborative projects of selfless charity (such as, for example, the Habitat for Humanity and the Mennonite Relief Agency). A particularly poignant illustration of an ethics of charity in an accentuated time of need is that of the saving of thousands of Jews from certain extinction during the German occupation of France in World War II. During the time of the Vichy government, the inhabitants of the small

town of Le Chambon, under the leadership of Pastor André Trocmé, collaborated in the hiding of thousands of Jews and thus kept them from the boxcars on their way to the death camps in Germany. The account of this story of deliverance has been provided by Philip Hallie in his soul-wrenching book, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*. The subtitle of the book masterfully consolidates the guiding motif: "The story of the village of Le Chambon and how goodness happened there." Clearly, goodness in the guise of a sacrificial love that bartered nothing in return was instantiated at Le Chambon. In this isolated village in Southern France there was a display of a gift that required no reciprocity—not even that of being acknowledged as a gift.¹⁵

The story of Le Chambon, and others like it, stand as a reminder of the need to consult case studies and local narratives to illustrate how the gift can be given and received, and how goodness can happen and justice be done within the economy of our civil societies. What stories of this sort teach is that there are indeed motivations of ethical attitudes and actions that transcend all expectations of return. The significant spin-off from such endeavors of genuine charity on the personal and social level is a moderating effect on the forces and metaphors of production and consumption, distribution and exchange. Here we see how the gift is able to impact upon civil society. Love becomes incarnate in human affairs. The eternal requirement of unconditionality is pre-enacted in the temporal domain of historical becoming.

But for this requirement of unconditionality to be heard in the rough and tumble of civil society certain presuppositions about both self and society need to be brought into question, presuppositions having to do with the senses of "ownness" and "ownership" both in the regulative principles of social organization and in the dynamics of self-understanding and self-constitution. Informed by a semantics of possession and dispossession, excess and expenditure, surplus and squandering, debt and repayment, within the restricted economy of a market society, the taken for granted assumption is that the gift is a commodity that first has to be owned. Thus, gift giving immediately gravitates into a transaction of gift exchange and ultimately makes sense only against the backdrop of a concept of private property. Rights of private property undergird the privilege of giving. To be able to dispossess oneself of something, to give something away, presupposes a condition of prior possession or ownership, which would seem to lead to the somewhat curious conclusion that only those who are privileged by ownership of private property are able truly to give. But suppose that we question this basic presupposition. Maybe the goods that are circulating are never strictly one's own. Maybe the very notions of strict ownership and absolute possession are slippery eels. Maybe the goods that

we appropriate from nature and through our sundry projects of artifactual production are themselves "gifts"—of which we are the stewards or custodians but never absolute owners. Perhaps a semantics of stewardship is more appropriate than the grammar of property rights and private ownership for understanding the efficacy of the gift in civil society.

Hand in glove with a problematizing of the sense of ownership in a restricted market economy is the problematizing of the sense of oneness in the philosophy of the subject of modernity that ushered in a concept of the self as isolated and enclosed, a zero-point consciousness that is somehow reflexively turned back upon itself, and in such a manner that the edges between "mine" and "yours" become sharply demarcated. In our shift to a communicative praxis textured by the transversal fibers of intersubjectivity, the distinction between "mine" and "yours," although not necessarily obliterated, is denied its privileged status, making possible a reframing of the project of self-constitution. Such a reframing requires a deconstruction of the modern, Cartesian platform for the "constitution of the subject," a platform that proceeds from the invention of a monadic mind and an effort to locate self-identity in the depths of a recessed interiority. This Cartesian prejudice bequeathed to modernity has the onerous task of marking out a path from one interiorized state of consciousness to another. Let us suppose, however, that these dichotomies and dualisms of "me" and "you," "mine" and "yours," are bogus rather than genuine, at least for openers in addressing the adventure of selfhood. Let us suppose that in the concrete history of the self in its quotidian social practices no such "problem of the existence of other minds" occurs. Indeed, as Max Scheler once observed, there may indeed be more of a "problem" of determining the status of the "I" than the status of the "We"!

Against the background of such a refiguration of subjectivity within the space of intersubjectivity, the ontological weight of "my own," "your own," and what is "owed" by and to both of us is significantly attenuated. In turn, this points the way to a rescuing of the gift from a circle of debtor-creditor exchanges, freeing the ritual of giving a gift from incurring a debt that requires repayment. No longer a transaction of giving something that I "own," or giving of "myself" as a collection of accumulated moral properties, mired in an economy of exchange relations, the giving of a gift is a practice that expects nothing in return, indeed is unconditional; and *mutatis mutandis* the receiving of a gift is then an acknowledgment of the unconditionality in giving because there are no "commodities" to be exchanged.

Such an unconditionality of the gift, it would seem, lies quite beyond the limits of justice, rights, duties, and obligations—beyond the prescriptions and tables of virtue that have been defined in the history of teleological,

deontological, and utilitarian ethical systems. The economy of justice is determined by the distinctions between what is mine and what is yours. Justice requires a distribution to each that which is her own, and demands retribution/punishment if the parameters that divide "mine" and "yours" are not dutifully acknowledged. The ends of justice are defined within the presuppositions of an economy of distribution and exchange. It is thus that the gift as unconditional love requires a suspension both of the teleological and the deontological, both of an ethics based on the ends of justice and one based on duty and human rights. Yet we must remember that suspension is not tantamount to obliteration. Within the transactions of human affairs across the wider reaches of civil society, considerations of ends, rights, duties, and the distribution of goods in the interests of achieving justice do indeed come into play. They still play a role and make their variegated claims. The teleological, deontological, and utilitarian questions, "What is the telos of human existence?", "What are my rights and duties as a rational being?", and "What is the greatest good for the greatest number?" are questions that need to be asked. Although suspended, teleological, deontological, and utilitarian inquiries are not ruled out of court. They are put out of play as foundationalist protocols for grounding ethical theory, but they return into the economy of human affairs as multiple directives after having been leavened by a giving without return, after being tempered by the *caritas* of gift giving, after experiencing, and if only for a moment, a love and concern that solicits no reward. When teleological, deontological, and utilitarian considerations return, they return as the relational components that make up a fitting response.

A fitting response has its moment of origination in the voice and the face of alterity. It is elicited via the incursions of exteriority rather than through legislations of law within a recessed interiority. A fitting response is brought to attention, to a hold on the world, by attending to the prior action, discourse, and wider cultural contents that make up our historical inherence. The fitting response is always a response to that which is exterior and prior, and it is only through this responsiveness to that which is exterior and prior that the ends, rights, duties, and goods within the economy of distributive justice come into play. Ends, rights, duties, and goods remain the stuff of ethical action in civil society. But through the encounter with the gift they become tempered by a depth dimension that was lacking before the possibility of an expenditure without return entered the purview of our concerns.

Notes

1. Gary Brent Madison, *The Political Economy of Civil Society and Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 1998).

2. Such is the position taken by Michael Walzer in *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). "If I can shape my identity through my possessions, then I can do so through my dispossessions. And, even more surely, what I can't possess, I can't give away" (123).

3. "Das Selbstbewusstsein ist *an und für sich*, indem und dadurch, dass es für ein anderes an und für sich ist: d.h. es ist nur als ein Anerkanntes." G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Philosophische Bibliothek, Sechste Auflage (Hamburg: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1952), 141. It is a pity that J. B. Baillie decided to translate *Anerkennung* as "recognition," thus blurring Hegel's own distinction between the knowing that accompanies acknowledging and the abstract cognition that travels with recognition and representation. See Baillie's translation, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Revised Second Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 229.

4. My use of "hermeneutics of acknowledgment" displays at least a family resemblance to what Paul Ricoeur has named "attestation" in *Oneself as Another*. "Attestation presents itself first, in fact, as a kind of belief. But it is not a doxic belief, in the sense in which *doxa* (belief) has less standing than *episteme* (science, or better, knowledge). Whereas doxic belief is implied in the grammar of 'I believe-that,' attestation belongs to the grammar of 'I believe-in.' It thus links up with testimony, as the etymology reminds us, inasmuch as it is the speech of the one giving testimony that one believes." *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 21.

5. It is clearly this curious serendipity in gift giving that Sartre had in mind when, in recalling Nietzsche, he penned his oft-quoted one-liner: "To give is to enslave." *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 594. Stephen H. Webb reminds us of the Nietzsche–Sartre connection on this particular point, highlighting the peril of excess itself becoming a sign of a power relation that obliterates the possibility of reciprocity, annihilating the gift as gift: "Excess is both the origin and the end of the gift, as if giving prompted by gratitude is not giving at all. Here giving has gone beyond the gift; in fact, it has gone so far that it belongs (returns) to the giver alone." *The Gifting God: A*

Trinitarian Ethics of Excess (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 67.

6. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso Press), 306.

7. *Ibid.*, 285, 286.

8. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 89.

9. *Ibid.*, 67–8.

10. *Ibid.*, 130–1.

11. *Ibid.*, 19, 66.

12. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 306.

13. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 98–9, 248. Eric Ramsey has developed an eschatological ethics that takes account of this amalgam of working and hoping that one finds in Kierkegaard. Ramsey has named his project an “ethics of relief,” which he develops against the backdrop of a “twofold strategy of working and waiting,” in which the telos of working aimed at affording relief from the occurrent ills of society is combined with an eschatological vision of hoping and waiting: “This twofold strategy of working and waiting can assist the critical theoretical project of an ethics of relief. As long as we are in history we shall not have total redemption. Redemption occurs at the end of history, as an origin of something other that it initiates. This thinking is future oriented without being teleological. Although any working may well have a telos, waiting only has a future.” “Communication and Eschatology: The Work of Waiting, an Ethics of Relief, and Areligious Religiosity,” *Communication Theory* vol. 7, November, 1997, 145–6.

14. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 249.

15. Philip P. Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).