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UNAVOWED AMBIGUITIES?:  
A PLEA FOR REASSESSING THE DISCOURSE ON THE GIFT<sup>1,2</sup>

In this introductory paper I attempt to displace the discourse on the gift from some major interpretations in order to rethink the gift in terms of its inherently diachronic, belated, and irreducibly ambiguous "constitution." In this context, I will critically examine both Derrida's deconstructive focus on the gift's purity and the "aporia" this entails, and the recent discussion of the so-called "primacy of givenness" in phenomenology of religion. This criticism will be supplemented by an exploration of the responsive co-constitution of the gift that I find anticipated in Hénaff's sociological and anthropological treatment of the issue. In refuting ontological, ethical, and theological over-determinations of the institution of the gift, I, hence, opt for reassessing the irreducible ambiguities of the gift that appear in a relational perspective, i.e., a perspective which acknowledges the ambiguous truth of the gift in terms of a "gift of the other." Rethinking the gift in these terms, however, results in avowing the most basic ambiguity that situates the gift in-between the economy of self-abandonment and the sacrificial logics of securing a "true other."

*The General Contours of the Discourse*

Recently, the question concerning the gift, its alleged purity, its conditions of possibility or impossibility, and its basic role in humanity's attempts at securing the "social bond," has moved once again into the focus of philosophical considerations with notable force. On the one hand, this true surge of interest is going hand in hand with a renewed, and perhaps for the first time indeed original interest in the seminal analyses on this topic offered

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been elaborated in the framework of the research project "Religion beyond myth and enlightenment," underwritten by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF P 23255-G19).

<sup>2</sup> In many respects, this article relies on B. Liebsch's basic discussion of the current discussion of the gift across various disciplines in the article "Umsonst: Die Gabe als nachträglich zu bewahrheitende Gegebenheit. Eine Zwischenbilanz der fragwürdigen Karriere der Gabe in kulturwissenschaftlichen, philosophischen und politischen Diskursen der Gegenwart," *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 38/1 (2013), 29-59. As to my understanding, this article is of paramount importance not only in its comprehensiveness, but especially in the way it presents a truly socio-phenomenological reading of the issue at hand, i.e., one that takes the necessity to apply phenomenology seriously, and, thus, succeeds in opening a wide array of insights both into the socio-cultural dynamics of the gift and its ambiguous receptions.

by Marcel Mauss<sup>3</sup>, a tendency that we find embodied in the works of Marcel Hénaff.<sup>4</sup> Yet this recent interest is not only due to a true reception of ethnographic theorems that have been recovered by Hénaff in the framework of a reflection on the *affective coherence of the social bond*, i.e., by way of an argument that had already been touched upon by Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>5</sup> and that is at the very heart of French social theory from Comte and Durkheim to Bataille and Girard.<sup>6</sup> Thus viewed, according to Hénaff, the question of the gift rather concerns the reasons for giving *in general* but not the reasons for giving *back* or reciprocating or even the gift's alleged *purity*. As to Hénaff, the "enigma of the gift"<sup>7</sup> refers to the essence of the social and the way it is assured in institutions of symbolic exchange that make up "one of the rocks on which our societies are built"<sup>8</sup>: that this rock is not made of magic, as Mauss speculated, but is rather a sediment of intelligible structures of symbolic mediation that assure the coherence of the "social bond" by way of transforming its abyssal affective nature into a functioning device of our struggles for reciprocal recognition, is the deep and lasting insight of Mauss' successors and their attempts at providing new foundations for social philosophy.

On the other hand, the heightened interest in the topic of the gift undoubtedly relates back to Derrida's earlier ground-breaking reflections on the "aporia of the gift"<sup>9</sup> that have recently been applied on a variety of practical issues such as hospitality, religion, and animality.<sup>10</sup> Derrida's initial reading revolves, to note this briefly, around a basic double-bind: he holds, on the one hand, that the title of the gift is only appropriate for a *pure* gift (which would involve that Mauss simply missed the very topic he had proposed); on the other hand, however, he also affirms that a *pure* gift cannot be given because the conditions of its being given—i.e., its reception and its destiny of being given back or being symbolically returned—would renounce its alleged purity and, thus, efface its very effectivity. The gift, in other words, *necessarily* has to be related to economy, which, by its definition of being "aneconomic," it is said (and hoped) to *interrupt*.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Trans. W.D. Halls (London: Routledge 1990).

<sup>4</sup> M. Hénaff, *Der Preis der Wahrheit. Gabe, Geld und Philosophie* (Frankfurt on the Main: Suhrkamp 2009); Engl. trans.: *The price of truth: Gift, money, and philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2010.) The very challenge and the potentials of ethnography for philosophy that are at stake in this context are presented very well in I. Därmann, *Fremde Monde der Vernunft. Die ethnologische Provokation der Philosophie* (Munich: Fink 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (London: Routledge 1987).

<sup>6</sup> On this correlation see T. Arppe, *Affectivity and the Social Bond. Transcendence, Economy, and Violence in French Social Theory* (Farnham: Ashgate 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Another exemplary formulation of this „enigma" can be found in M. Godelier, *The enigma of the gift* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Mauss, op. cit., p. 4

<sup>9</sup> J. Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*. Trans. P. Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., J. Derrida, *Acts of religion*. Ed. G. Anidjar (New York and London 2008); idem, *The animal that therefore I am*, Trans. D. Wills (New York: Fordham University Press 2008).

Even if this aporia is always already solved on the practical level, we may still note here at the outset that Derrida's argument seems to depart from a rather *synchronic* interpretation of the gift and, hence, appears to betray the very economy of argumentation that animates his deconstructive insistence on "categories" like *différance*, *belatedness*, *supplementarity*, and *dissemination* (a topic to which I will return later). This impression, however, loses much of its acuity if we take a look beyond Derrida's discourse on the gift in the narrow sense. In fact, there is good evidence in his later work that Derrida finally came to fully embrace the chiasmatic *intertwining of the unconditional and the conditional* as the precondition for a historic—or as he later says in the context of religion: *messianic*—realization of the gift.<sup>11</sup> This becomes very clear, to mention but one field of further investigation, in his discussion of *hospitality* and its irrefutable ambivalence in terms of what he called *hostipitality*<sup>12</sup>: confronted with the unforeseeable "wager of hospitality" (R. Kearney), the host is factually torn in-between the ethical imperative of an "unconditional hospitality," which offers in principle everything to the guest, and the socio-cultural and ontological necessities to realize this imperative within the existing "laws of hospitality"—laws that can only aspire to contain their immanent injustice by incorporating the extraterritorial yet unfulfillable claim of the unconditional that keeps the host from ending up in the cold and unproductive sterility of one's substance-like integrity and god-like masterfulness. The concrete application of the discourse on the gift in different contexts, like hospitality, demonstrates very clearly the critical productivity of Derrida's account: it does so in offering an exemplary articulation of the productivity of the aporia in the practical field.

However, Derrida's account of the gift does not remain uncontested on philosophical grounds. Whereas Hénaff questions the general possibility and meaningfulness to even talk about a *pure* gift, since this would blind us to the basic fact that gifts are given anyway and indeed make up the secret social grammar of communities, other thinkers oppose Derrida's account for different reasons. In this regard we can, finally, note an intensified interest in the topic of the gift within philosophy and esp. phenomenology of religion, with Jean-Luc Marion's work figuring at the very forefront.<sup>13</sup> In this context, one issue is to "rethink God as gift,"<sup>14</sup> i. e., in terms of self-abandoning love in order, finally, to gain insight into the gift-character of all (created) reality, i.e.,

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<sup>11</sup> On the role of the gift and its impossible possibility in Derrida's account of religion, see *The gift of death*. Trans. D. Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 1995), *passim*, but also his reflections in *Acts of religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

<sup>12</sup> J. Derrida, "Hostipitality," in *Acts of religion*, *op. cit.*, pp. 356-420; J. Derrida and A. Dufourmantelle, *Of hospitality. Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Let it suffice here to mention Marion's *God without Being. Hors-texte* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1995), which set the tone for a new philosophical discourse on "God" by bracketing the onto-theological horizon of our metaphysical traditions, and his later works that unfold the "primacy of givenness" in a more systematic way, thus transforming phenomenology under the guise of the "saturated phenomenon"; see esp. his systematic account in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*. Trans. J. L. Koskey (Stanford: Stanford University, 2002), and his study in a variety of "saturated phenomena" entitled *In Excess. Studies in saturated phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. R. Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift. Marion, Derrida, and the limits of phenomenology*. (New York: Fordham University Press 2001)

a general "generosity of things."<sup>15</sup> Under the header of this "primacy of givenness," which has been on the agenda of post-Husserlian phenomenology for quite some time but has been explored systematically by Marion only more recently, a variety of phenomenological authors have indeed taken up the issue of the gift, or rather of *givenness*, to introduce this generic term that dates back to the early Husserl.<sup>16</sup> And it is exactly in Husserl's spirit that contemporary phenomenology attempts to go beyond or even suspend the seemingly misleading aporia that imprisons us between the alleged purity of the gift and its only conditional realization. What counts on phenomenological terrain, we are reminded by Marion again and again, is only the phenomenal *appeal* or *élan* that assures the unfolding givenness of phenomena—be they pure or impure, unconditional or conditioned.<sup>17</sup> Put differently, phenomenology, in bracketing the "principle of sufficient reason,"<sup>18</sup> is not at all interested in preconceived determinations of the phenomena but only in the dynamism or breaking-forth of their primordial "givenness." In its refutation of a constituting ego-subject and the formative power of the horizon, this "phenomenology of givenness" departs from Husserl, but undoubtedly breaks with his inaugural idea of phenomenology. Thus viewed, Marion's conception of "saturated phenomena" rather paves the path for acknowledging the excessive "eventmentality"<sup>19</sup> of phenomena which gives above and beyond the desires and intentional capacities of both a constituting consciousness and the confines of pre-given horizons of meaning.

#### *Appropriations and Omissions*

Notwithstanding that a "phenomenology of givenness" represents an enormous breakthrough in terms of addressing the issue of *phenomenality as such*, i.e., the conditions under which anything may enter into the rank of a phenomenon, the question remains whether or not the phenomenological account in general—but also ontological, ethical and theological appropriations of the gift that occur in its wake and neighborhood—does not, in the last analysis, remain inadequate in regard of the gift as such. Let me

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<sup>15</sup> See here Jason W. Alvis, *Marion and Derrida on The Gift and Desire: Debating the Generosity of Things*. (Dordrecht et al.: Springer, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. E. Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Trans. W. P. Alston and G. Nakhnikian (Dordrecht: Kluwer 1990), where Husserl meditates on the idea of an "absolute givenness" that is not dependent upon a transcendental ego.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J.-L. Marion, *Being given*, op. cit., pp. 179-247, on the "degrees" of givenness; see also C. Gschwandtner, *Degrees of givenness. On saturation in Jean-Luc Marion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2014.

<sup>18</sup> J.-L. Marion, *The visible and the revealed*. Trans. C. M. Gschwandtner and others (New York: Fordham University Press 2008), p. 5: "Since it makes possible the return to the things themselves, the principle of all principles should perhaps be understood as a suspension of the principle of sufficient reason insofar as the phenomenon is not indebted to any reason, because its givenness itself justifies it."

<sup>19</sup> On this general determination of the given phenomenon, see J.-L. Marion, *In Excess*, op. cit., p. 38; in this context it becomes especially clear how indebted Marion's focus on the phenomenality of givenness is to Derrida's discourse of the gift, which assumes, too, the experiencability of an *event* that escapes all objectification, thematization, or presentation. See on this a discussion between Derrida and Marion, documented in *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. J. D. Caputo and M. J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

meditate on this problem respectively, and provide some examples for the omissions this entails.

If, firstly, a *phenomenological* discourse asks: 'How can a gift manifest itself?' 'How can a gift be given?' Or: 'How do we have to conceive of the *phenomenality* of the gift?' And finally, as Marion contends: Isn't the 'how' as such the very gift that animates all givenness, i.e., in unfolding its very "fold"?—this way of approaching the issue indeed engenders a set of questions that seem to have, in the last analysis, nothing to do with *concrete* phenomena of *gift giving* in their multiple forms, rationalities, moralities, and economies any more as they are being dealt with in cultural anthropology, the cultural sciences, and contemporary social philosophy. At center-stage here is rather a *distinctly philosophical question* that concerns the relationship of the subject's freedom and constituting powers to the "dative of manifestation" as such but does not extend to the generative or inter-factual dimension that is at stake in the very phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> And indeed, even if the attempt to reduce the gift to "pure givenness"—i.e., to free it from causality and exchange and thus to suspend the figure of a "giver"<sup>21</sup>—seems at least to open the possibility to rethink it with regard to the *effect* that it entails on the side of the one (the gifted, *l'adonné*) who receives oneself by receiving it<sup>22</sup> (whatever it may be: somebody, something, no-thing: e.g., love, time), this move remains inherently problematic. In the last analysis, it seems not only to provide a decapitated notion of the subject (and, first and foremost, of freedom and responsibility); but it also appears to indeed beg the question of "who comes after the subject,"<sup>23</sup> rendering it a mere annex to the towering "paternalism" of the "gift of God," which alone instates the univocity of givenness, declining anything else to the rank of "abandoned phenomena,"<sup>24</sup> i.e., privatively unfolded phenomena. In this context, the very *ambiguity* of the "gift" is totally eclipsed, leaving us without any option to rethink its very productivity.

Secondly, the *ontological* appropriation of the gift, which dates back to the later Heidegger's thought of the *es gibt*, revolves around his conception of Being in terms of what gives itself in the openness of the "there is." Heidegger's related "heroic" conception of *Dasein*, however, as a critical reader like Jan Patocka has argued, seems to pave the path for an "irrationalism of a pre-existing Being," i.e., a movement "lacking all human closure, all practical value," a process which thus "leaves entirely aside what

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<sup>20</sup> Marion's notion of "interdonation" might offer a counter-examples to this critical estimation but unfortunately this issue has thus far been left largely unexplored in his work.

<sup>21</sup> See J.-L. Marion, "Sketch of a phenomenological concept of the gift," in *The visible and the revealed*, op. cit., pp. 80-100.

<sup>22</sup> See on this Marion, *Being given*, op. cit., pp. 262-71.

<sup>23</sup> I take this from an earlier anthology edited by E. Cadava,, *Who comes after the subject?* (New York and London: Routledge 1991), which brought French phenomenology (and especially Marion and Henry) back into play to respond to the challenges of post-structuralist theory.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. J.-L. Marion, *Being given*, op. cit., pp. 308-19; on Marion's account, as far as I see, abandonment lingers between indifference and obsession with the given but does not seem to add a positive mode of giving. Again, perhaps the solution for the problem might be found in Marion's notion of "inter-donation," which, however, remains thus far quite underdetermined.

man is and can be to man."<sup>25</sup> This reading receives evidence in regard, e.g., to Heidegger's understanding of *war* in terms of a gift, which may bear the potential to bestow responsibility on the single "warrior" (*Krieger*) but, more generally regarded, understands this potential exclusively in terms of a "sacrifice" for the "truth of Being" (*Wahrheit des Seyns*).<sup>26</sup> In this same regard, Patocka's glorifying depiction of the "frontline-experience" in his *Heretical essays*<sup>27</sup>, however, is not unsuspecting, too: in the context of his reinterpretation of war in Heraclitus' terms, Patocka also acknowledges the necessity of repeating the sacrifice for reaching a "true hyper-individuality"; this move, however, does not seem to escape the lingering ambiguity of rendering sacrifice and victimhood a necessary condition of historical becoming.

Thirdly, Levinas' *ethical* account of the *gift of the other*, which presents a concise critique of both Husserl and Heidegger's insufficient views of confronting intersubjective alterity, comes to mind in this context. Since here, however, is not the place to introduce Levinas' radical ethics of the other in detail, let it suffice to say that it does neither revolve around a traditional "humanism of generosity" nor a normative account of morality. It rather embodies the most rigorous attempt to *found* ethics beyond the unificatory requirements of onto-theology by rethinking it in terms of an excessive and unmeasurable *gift*. What is most remarkable in Levinas' ethical appropriation of Bataille's theory of *sovereignty* and *expenditure*<sup>28</sup>, undoubtedly is his sensibility to the *diachronic* time of the gift, i.e., its generative dimension and way of an always belated proving (*Bewährung*). This diachronic interpretation revolves around the gift or rather sacrifice of the centered subject's radical self-exposure, which is epitomized in Levinas' concept of "saying as exposure to another," i.e. as "giving."<sup>29</sup> Thus viewed, the gift finds its very truth not

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<sup>25</sup> "J. Patocka, *Philosophy and Selected Writings*. Ed. and transl. E. Kohák (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 271.

<sup>26</sup> See M. Heidegger, *Zu Ernst Jünger*. Ed. P. Trawny (Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann 2004), p. 273-4; the notion of sacrifice is also used in this context of war and the warrior in the lecture on Parmenides, cf. M. Heidegger, *Parmenides*. Ed. M. Frings (Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann 1992), p. 250.

<sup>27</sup> J. Patocka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court 1996).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. G. Bataille, *La part maudite, essai d'économie générale*. Vol. 2. (Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1949).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, op. cit., pp. 48-51. It is, of course, totally insufficient to reduce this genealogy to Bataille (who remains ambiguous with regard to the violence of excessive generosity), since many other influences can be tracked in this regard, ranging from Plotinus to Kierkegaard, yet Bataille's influence still appears remarkable. Especially the latter emphasized this diachronic dimension, too, in his insistence to understand historic reality in a twofold sense: "Die geschichtliche Wirklichkeit tritt zum Subjekt auf zweifache Art ins Verhältnis: teils als Gabe, die sich nicht verschmähen lässt, teils als eine Aufgabe, die verwirklicht werden will." (S. Kierkegaard, *Über den Begriff der Ironie mit ständiger Rücksicht auf Sokrates* (Düsseldorf: Diederichs 1961), p. 281. If we take Michel Henry's (for whom Kierkegaard was exceptionally important) assertion that Life is "a gift which cannot be refused," (M. Henry, *The essence of manifestation*. Trans. G. Etkorn (The Hague: Kluwer 1973), p. 475), i.e., the question of a "givenness" *kath'exochen* that will later be discussed in his treatment of Christianity in terms of a "transcendental forgetfulness" of the essence (cf. M. Henry, *I am the truth. Toward a philosophy of Christianity*. Trans. S. Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press

only in the way it is dealt with by its recipients, but first and foremost in the "gift of the gift"<sup>30</sup> that may not at all entertain any direct relationship with its origin.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, this position is undoubtedly of utmost importance for rethinking the discourse on the gift on phenomenological grounds, but, on the other hand, we must not omit the fact that Levinas' account remains in itself problematic. More concretely put, it appears indeed plagued by a deep-rooted incapacity to approach what is *beyond Being* in truly non-equivocal terms: in declaring "the Good" to be the only reference of such a move (or rather leap, to recall again the influence of Kierkegaard), Levinas undoubtedly succeeded to put forward a strong critique of Husserl's implicitly analogical account of the other and Heidegger's incorporation of otherness in the war-like logics of Being.<sup>32</sup> In his late work, Levinas finally goes so far as to affirm the necessity to even take over responsibility for the persecutor and consequently proposes to understand subjectivity in terms of "hostage," "substitution," and "traumatism."<sup>33</sup> Practically regarded, he, however, does not address or rather refutes the alterity of an other who appears to be untrue to the very alterity he embodies. In this context, the notorious discussion of Levinas' discarding of "the Palestinian" as an exemplary figure of the other and his insistence that all which exceeds the shared heritage of Athens and Jerusalem is "dance" and, hence, a "rest" that "must be translated," is telling: it epitomizes the abyssal difficulty of this hyperbolic position to come to terms with the inherently *ambiguous* gift of the other.<sup>34</sup> In this case, a discourse that revolves around the priority of *ethical* alterity, finally, runs the risk to turn into a discourse of securing a "true other," thus denegating the very ambiguity that animates the *ambiguous gift of the other*.

Finally Ricoeur, to mention just one appropriation of *theological* theorems on the part of philosophical and phenomenological reflection, at the end of his very intellectual itinerary endorses a true "theology of the gift."<sup>35</sup> In this

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2003), pp. 133-51), we can see how this thinker conjoins quite uniquely the question of ontology with the question of ethics.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff 1979), p. 269: "the gift of the power of giving".

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Liebsch, art. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, op. cit, pp. 21-7.

<sup>33</sup> E. Levinas, *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*. Trans. A. Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1981).

<sup>34</sup> Excellent presentations and exhaustive listings of Lévinas' shortcomings in regard of the non-Western other are provided by R. Bernasconi, "Who is my neighbor? Who is the other? Questioning the generosity of Western thought." In *Emmanuel Lévinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, vol. 4. Ed. C. Katz and L. Trout (London/New York: Routledge, 2005); S. Sikka, "How Not to Read the Other? 'All the Rest Can Be Translated,'" *Philosophy Today* 43/2 (1999). L. Ma, "All the rest must be translated: Lévinas' notion of sense." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35/4(2008), 599-612.

<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur was, without a doubt, critical of an unreflected instrumentalizing of phenomenology by theology and refused to be simply subsumed to the proponents of the so-called "tournant théologique" in French phenomenology. In the squad of "new theologians" nominated by Janicaud (cf. "The theological turn of French phenomenology," in: idem et al. *Phenomenology and the 'theological turn': The French debate* (New York: Fordham University Press 2000, pp. 16-103)), who are accused for having breached the principle of Husserl's "methodological atheism," Ricoeur is missing. Yet, as the later Ricoeur himself frankly confesses, his discourse is working

context, Ricoeur's overall and indeed truly ambitious aim is to escape the ever-lasting conflictual implications of Hegel's "struggle for recognition" that is, by and large, considered to be the constitutive background for traditional theories of the gift. Against the economy that this struggle for *reciprocal* recognition entails, he pits a seemingly paradoxical "economy of the gift"<sup>36</sup> that revolves around the bonding potential of *mutual* binding, i.e., around responsible (but not necessarily reciprocal) action in the traditional, hellenistic sense of the word. The leading paradigm here is a *vertical* logic of excess, generosity, and love that is designed to suspend the logics of lack or scarcity, which would result in the reduction of the *zoon politikon* to the *homo economicus*. Ricoeur, in this context, comes very close to what makes the social world tick beyond economic calculus, utilitarian thought and functionalist explanation, but, in the last analysis, seems to conflate the excessive logics of the gift by his unanimous recourse to the *agape* and the "theology of grace."<sup>37</sup> The gift, in this context, becomes adopted as the "primordial word" (*Urwort*) of theology.<sup>38</sup> And even if Ricoeur scholars like Richard Kearney emphasize on a manifold occasions the *mere possibility to partake* in the unconditional promise that the divine play of the possible offers<sup>39</sup>, the tendency to all too easily refute the basic ambiguities that this gift entails seems to prevail in this and related accounts, too.

#### *Toward a Responsive Phenomenology of the Gift*

What may be derived from these critical assessments? I propose that we should retain at least one major insight, namely, that phenomenological, ontological, ethical and theological appropriations of the gift are altogether haunted by one and the same problem: all appear indeed to be involved in a self-critical revision that concerns philosophy's capacity to approach and reflect the *limits* of appearing. This revision, however, locates the topic of the gift and givenness on both foundational and inherently unstable grounds. Whether the otherness of the other *person*, "God," or *Being* (but also *nature*

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on the border of philosophy and theology, and is not at all reluctant to confront and challenge the traditional superiority of the philosophical *logos* from within their intersections. On this the gift in the late Ricoeur, see M. Joy, "Paul Ricoeur, Solicitude, Love, and the Gift," in: H. Ruin, J. Bornemark (eds.), *Phenomenology and religion: New frontiers* (Södertörn: Södertörn University Library Press 2010), pp. 83-104.

<sup>36</sup> P. Ricoeur, "Ethical and Theological Considerations on the Golden Rule." In M. Wallace (ed.) *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. Trans. D. Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 300-1; see also P. Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*. Trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 479-86.

<sup>37</sup> On the conception of an "economy of the gift" in Ricoeur, and on the potentials and limits of this conception, see W. D. Hall, "The economy of the gift: Paul Ricoeur's poetic redescription of reality." *Literature & theology* 20/2(2006), 189-204.

<sup>38</sup> From differing viewpoints, this tendency can be found in R. Kearney, *The God who may be. A hermeneutics of religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2001); C. O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2002); V. Hoffmann (ed.), *Die Gabe: ein 'Urwort' der Theologie?* (Frankfurt on the Main: Lembeck 2009); A. Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality*. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Cf., e.g., R. Kearney, *The God who may be*, op. cit., pp. 29, 110.

and the *world* might come to one's mind) is concerned, the discourse on the gift seems to revolve around and indeed live from their ineffable nature and its "feedback" on the subject. With this, however, we arrive at a truly critical point, since a sort of a subjectivist short-circuiting of the very question seems to strike back here: rather than meditating upon the subject's insufficiencies and incapacities, isn't it rather "the other" (who is "never certain,"<sup>40</sup> as Hénaff reminds us) whom we need to consider much more rigorously when thinking the gift? Isn't she the addressee of our gift and whether or not giving is possible, that is, the only one who may *attest* its true character or instead refute its falsity, banality, or malevolence? Can we truly give to others if they escape us irreducibly, i.e., if they remain forever withdrawn in their ineffable alterity? And isn't rather the other – whoever she may have been, will be, or pretends to be (*persona*) – the one who originally passed "the gift of the gift" to us, bei it by having us welcomed or by repeatedly appealing to us? Isn't, thus, the reception of the gift and its proof (*Bewährung*) as well as propagation (*Weitergabe*) *absolutely* constitutive for it, possibly more constitutive than all our – always conditioned and impure – acts of giving, however purifying, generous and denuding they may be? Doesn't the question of the gift thus open onto a *life* that is definitely not our own, but indeed the generative life of the world, in which we cannot but partake?

Whatever the subject of this "life" may be – God, the creation, the generative functioning of the social bond, or Being – we are reminded here that we need to think it in *terms of a gift – in order not to lose it*. This, however, also explains the seductive powers of this very discourse: it turns out to be a discourse which lives from the fact that the gift bears an affinity or is indeed considered to be connected to the *origin* of all these phenomena. The gift, thus viewed, even appears as a new type of the origin: in its disseminative nature it offers an indeed extremely appealing, namely *transversal* notion of the origin. More closely and critically regarded, we, however, start to realize that its binding powers derive from the presupposition that the reminiscence of or rather the recourse to the meaning of a pure, one-sided giving can assure the reanimation of the *always already lost origin* – be it the "social bond," an unscathed community, an immemorial past, or the ideal of an unalienated, authentic (co)existence – and that it may, finally, achieve a sustainable form within an "ethics" and "politics" of the gift.

Confronted with this excessive demand being put onto the gift, one may, of course, suspect that the selective implantation of this originally anthropological theorem into philosophical discourses concerning the origin is simply misleading. First and foremost, doesn't the emphasis that has been put one-sidedly either on the claimed purity or the one-sidedness of the gift lead us to neglect the vast variety of related phenomena; phenomena that are not necessarily marked – to once again emphasize this point – by any ethical superiority that is said to bring us closer to these "lost origins." This sort of a *metabasis* is exactly the criticism that has been launched by Hénaff against Derrida and Marion, claiming that they have grafted an ethical perspective onto our perception of the institutions of the gift, thus relegating its social and economic determinations to a merely secondary level.<sup>41</sup> As Hénaff

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<sup>40</sup> M. Hénaff, *Der Preis der Wahrheit*, op. cit., p. 402.

<sup>41</sup> M. Hénaff, *Der Preis der Wahrheit*, op. cit., pp. 217-8.

contends convincingly in this regard, the importance of the ritual and economy is, thus viewed, simply eclipsed.<sup>42</sup>

However we may adopt this criticism in detail, there is at least one general directive to be derived from it: what we need to avoid is the deeply questionable tendency to conflate the institution of the gift with the promise for recovering lost origins, which it is all too frequently taken to embody. This latter tendency indeed results in a one-sided interpretation, which—to employ the phenomenological optics once again—makes us simply miss the gift's concrete *phenomenality*. Viewed against this background, we should rather insist on the irreducible and unavoidable *ambiguity* of the gift and the fact that its truth—to risk this word here—can only be found in its radically unforeseeable reception<sup>43</sup>, i.e. in its concrete and changing modes of acceptance, propagation, refutation, or any other possible way it is dealt with by its addressee, the "gifted one."<sup>44</sup>

Given this and in light of the recent sociological and anthropological reassessments, this leads me to opt for an *inherently relational account* of the gift. In this perspective, the radical idea of the gift offered by Levinas, Derrida and Blanchot, which can be found at the heart of many recent attempts at its appropriation for the sake of societal integration, mutual (esp. intercultural and inter-religious) understanding, etc., receives a very different twist: it is, I argue, only by way of its *reception*, that is, as constitutively belated and retarded within a "hermeneutics without end," that the gift may reveal its "truth."<sup>45</sup> In the meantime, however, it is not only beset and indeed beleaguered by irreducible ambiguities. Exactly in accepting them, it rather opens the unfathomable realm of an *in-between* that makes room for the *promise of the new*—and be this the rejuvenating recovery of the old, or the oldest and indeed immemorial, i.e., our "lost origins."

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<sup>42</sup> A similar argument has also been formulated by Alain Caillé, who explores the politico-religious in terms of a set of interdependent institutionalizing practices that revolve around the *symbolic* practice of the gift; a gift, however, that is far from being pure and one-sided but may either be ritual, strategic or un-economic. Cf. A. Caillé, „Le politico-religieux. Dix-sept (plus une) thèses embryonnaires écrites dans un esprit de topique sociologique“, in *Revue du MAUSS* 19, 2002/1, 304-308.

<sup>43</sup> An exemplary phenomenon to be dealt with in this context is, of course, *love*: the expression *the gift of love* perfectly epitomizes this ambiguity of a gift that is—even if it is given without remainder—dependent upon its reception in order to give the distinctive "more" that it does not have. See on this idea J.-L. Marion, *The erotic phenomenon*. Trans. S. E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2007), which discusses the "gift" in the context of a philosophical notion of love that is non-intentional, and intrinsically bound-up with the other.

<sup>44</sup> The question of the so-called "third party," (*le tiers*), would require attention in this context: the gift is not only given by someone to somebody, but this happens in a concrete—normative, cultural, etc.—context, i.e., never without other others (and/or orders), and be it in their internalized presence as in the case of conscience, which, as Ricoeur noted, is, perhaps, the innermost form of alterity.

<sup>45</sup> This hypothesis is also endorsed by Liebsch, art. cit.

*The Promise of the Gift and the Return of Sacrifice*

Such a promise is, however, in itself far from being unambiguous. Thus viewed, to conceive of the gift rather calls upon us to put into brackets not so much the *instances* of the gift (as Marion proposed) but to suspend the *promises* that seem to always already walk hand in hand with it. These promises, as I have mentioned before, are embodied in imaginations of escape, mercy, or salvation that revolve around the anxieties related to our "lost origins." This is a point that we can also find clearly emphasized in Hénaff's treatise, who contends that the "gift" is part of a heritage, i.e., of an "original givenness" to which we, on our part, *can* respond by way of giving. And even if Hénaff's general intention appears to be quite clear, since he emphasizes on many occasions that he wants to recuperate a dimension of responding that attests to our indebtedness to others beyond any *moral* obligation, his analysis still remains ambiguous in this respect, too. What is meant by the "original givenness" to which Hénaff seems to tie his interpretation? Doesn't this expression refer directly to all too well known figures of the "wholly other" to take center-stage again in his inherently post-metaphysical discourse? Traditionally, all these figures have indeed been used to concretize the very gift of the giftedness to give, i.e., the gift that gives others not simply givens but the gift of giving (i.e., the capacity to give) as such. But somewhat surprisingly Hénaff, too, concludes a chapter dealing with the irrevocably ended "age of sacrifice" that seems to dispose of these figures with the following reflections:

"What the movement of science and technology was not able to remove is the fact and the conception of an original givenness: given is the world as such, time, life, Being in its totality. This is a fundamental riddle that the monotheistic visions sought to take up and tried to appropriate for themselves. There is an everlasting, overabundant, infinite gift and thence the appeal to a giver who is responsible for that. One could give it a personal name: God. Or designate it in terms of the anonymous gesture of what gives itself, abandons itself, Being. And one has termed this one-sided gift, this unexplained favor *mercy*."<sup>46</sup>

Of course Hénaff further relates this question to the problem of *guilt* and asks whether the depicted situation resulted in the sanctification of guilt or rather in its effacement in the development of modernity. Yet, even if he holds that the old idea of "cosmic guilt" became disenchanting and dissolved into a merely human economy of rituals that organize the giving back of an "original debt," which is taken to assure the moral grammar of reciprocal recognition, this technical solution to the problem is not at all able to dispose of the *promise* that we associate with the institution of the gift. In other words, even in a post-heroic age the irreducibility of the ontological figure of an "original gift" unavoidably conjures up an ethics and, finally, a politics of the gift that revolves around the desired promises to offer a way *out*, possibly *the* way out of one's (or this generation's) "fallen condition."

If we apply this insight to our contemporary situation, such visions of escape concern first and foremost the excessive capitalization of traditional life-

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<sup>46</sup> M. Hénaff, *Der Preis der Wahrheit*, op. cit., p. 310-1 (trans. M.S.)

forms and their dissipation in the maelstrom of globalization and the discontents that it engenders.<sup>47</sup> But *what* does the idea of the gift really promise in such a (structurally always recurring) situation of crisis? Is it really about a *way out* of the regime of capitalizing reason and the structurally enforced accumulation of capital—which would lead, by the way, whithersoever? Doesn't it rather serve to remind us of the *lost origin* of this system? Or is it meant to function as an (ethical) *complement* to it, as recent theories of "post-growth" (*décroissance*) seem to propose? Given this manifold of interpretations, isn't the gift working here as a sort of "empty signifier" that simply indicates the possibility of the un-economic (and hence of another, possibly more general "economy") throughout the all-reigning realm of economy? However one may respond to these questions, they definitely entail a series of other quandaries, which all concern the always possible transmutation of the gift into its "accursed other"—the *sacrifice*. And indeed, when looking closer, we need to ask whether or not a gift that is said to have itself no objective price or relative value—but transgresses the calculus of prices and the normative registry of values—can be received (and thought) *as* a gift without immediately falling back into an *economy of sacrifice*? If, indeed, economy is the other of the gift, but the gift as such—in order to retain its very status of a gift—requires (at least the horizon of) economy to manifest itself as a gift, sacrifice appears as the other of the more "general economy" that relates the gift and economy in terms of their conflicting yet irreducible interdependency. Given this, the question would of course be how to understand this "sacrifice": do we have to conceive of it in terms of a merely symbolic ritual of breaching our habitual modes of inauthentic existence, in terms of a passionate renunciation or even excessive expenditure of commodities, or in terms of an act of ultimate self-abandonment?<sup>48</sup>

Howsoever we may finally respond to this question, it appears beyond doubt that the issue of *sacrifice* demands acute attention in this context, not the least because it is intrinsically interrelated with the legitimization of violence and its structural implication in the societal and cultural orders. If the gift in its decidedly one-sided or pure forms is not about some-thing but rather about what is without objective measure (no-thing, e.g., love, desire, time) in order to assure participation in the "original gift," (no-thing, too, e.g., survival, Being-with), we may suspect that the (promise of the) gift in its unconditional and un-economic character indeed verges towards (or collapses into?) a *logic of sacrifice*. In revealing the *option* of the un-economic, does it not explicitly claim to be extra-ordinary and, thus, embody a true *sacrum factum* that assures the possibility of a binding with our lost origin(s)?<sup>49</sup> But in being un-conditional with regard to the ontological laws of self-preservation and "care," does it not also renounce any activity on the part of the "gifted"? Given this unconditional character, does it not, hence, also appear more and more *unacceptable*, especially if it entails the sacrifice of no-

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<sup>47</sup> On this dynamics see A. Appadurai, *Fear of small numbers. An essay in the geography of anger* (Durham: Duke University Press 2006).

<sup>48</sup> On these distinctions see H. Münkler & K. Fischer, „Nothing to kill or die for... Überlegungen zu einer politischen Theorie des Opfers.“ *Leviathan* 3(2000): 343-362.

<sup>49</sup> Here would of course be the appropriate place to deal with *religion* in terms of the ambiguity of the gift, and esp. with its "two sources" in Derrida's sense, but I have to reserve this discussion for another time.

thing, ultimately a person's life, which can by definition have no price or objective value, as Kant has insisted upon? And if it is beyond any such practical measure must we not renounce it as it leaves no way to respond to or to rejoin it, but confronts us with a simple *fait accompli* that has always already been decided without the subject's participation—*malgré lui*? Given this, it seems in fact as if the ambiguity of the gift—in its promises of either purity, one-sidedness, or excessive expenditure—is as irreducible and dangerous as its practice is said to be able to create those basic social relations that are presupposed by our reciprocal relationships, but cannot be engendered by them.

This analysis is far from being exhaustive, and perhaps even far from being able to even pose the right question in an appropriate way. It insists, however, at least on the basic fact that the gift, to put this in a nutshell, is not and is never simply there. Put differently, it does not show itself from itself as a gift. Husserl's "principle of all principles" seems to go awry in this regard. If we take Husserl's insight into the as-structure as the basic principle of the meaningful constitution of the given world seriously, doesn't this rather point to the fact that nothing is simply given *as* a gift, as giving itself as a gift? This again demonstrates that for the gift to appear as a gift, it is necessary that it is apperceived, interpreted, and thought *as* a gift. Given this, we need to distinguish it not in its generic terms but rather according to its *specific* modes of givenness, i.e., against the backdrop of the insight that nobody can give alone and according to his (sic!) own powers. Rather, the gift needs to be thought as a power that has been given to me—as a "gift of the gift"—and in the context of its unforeseeable reception (and perhaps verification) that is left to the other who is—as we have heard—"never for sure."

Given all this, however, should we not finally renounce the very idea of a *pure* gift in Derrida's sense, i.e., a gift that cannot be returned *at all*? And doesn't its claimed absoluteness run the risk of the "worst violence," as the practical dialectics of the self-abandoning gift in Levinas' has taught us?<sup>50</sup> Wouldn't this hyperbolic hypothesis indeed rob the other of every initiative at taking center-stage in the very drama of appearing? Thus viewed, shouldn't we rather insist that the anticipation of a gift that might productively inure to the benefit of the other does not necessarily nullify its very character and render the other a minor freedom? But wouldn't a reduction of the problem of the gift to a set of ritually codified practices of gift-giving that feed the dynamics of reciprocating recognition, as Hénaff proposes, sacrifice all too quickly the promise of the gift as such—a promise, which resides, as I have argued, in the re-appropriation of our desires for our always already lost origin(s)? To put this differently: what would the promise of the gift, embodied, e.g., in the given word, finally mean if it were to unfold outside of the imponderable ambiguities of the gift of a *lived* promise, however fragile and insufficient it might be? It is beyond doubt that such a promise oscillates between, on the one hand, the most radical, e.g.,

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<sup>50</sup> On the risk of this "ultimate violence" in Levinas' discourse, see already Derrida's early essay, "Violence and metaphysics: An essay on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and difference*. Trans. A. Bass (London and New York: Routledge 1979), pp. 97-192, here p.

kenotic self-sacrifice<sup>51</sup> and, on the other hand, the lingering sacrifice of the other (see above); yet to rid it of this ambiguity would dissolve its very productivity, too, which is only capable of "building a bridge to a yet invisible shore,"<sup>52</sup> i.e., to the truly other. In accepting its always coming acceptance, propagation and even possible denegation, the gift – be it the gift of life, love, death, responsibility, time, etc. – by definition gives *more than it has to give*. It gives the space of an in-between that unfolds the room for a creative unfolding of what exceeds one's own potentials and mastery. But perhaps it also takes more than it seems to promise. It is only, I would thus argue, in-between these not only conflicting but intersecting extremes that we can give an account of the gift. The "gift of love," for instance, gives, as already Plotinus emphasized, *unmeasurably more* than it has,<sup>53</sup> yet in its very *unconditionality* love is also – as Jean-Luc Marion notes in a reflection of unprecedented depth at the very limits of the metaphysical tradition – declared "as one declares war."<sup>54</sup>

All this is, of course, not without consequences for our understanding of philosophy. If it is, in demonstrating a "non-indifference" for the other, translated into the "wisdom of love," as Levinas proposes,<sup>55</sup> we still have to be careful – since love is not at all unambiguous but remains *intrinsically* related to its very other, violence.<sup>56</sup> If philosophy, thus, wants to become truly self-reflective, it is in deep need to reflect upon the ways it deals with its all too often suppressed others – be it religion, violence, or the even more abysmal quandary of what we are used to call "religious violence." The discourse of the gift, which revolves around the intricate ambiguity and irreducible anachronicity of its very subject, provides, as I sought to argue in this paper, a valuable guiding thread for this all too necessary undertaking.

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<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., R. van Riessen, *Man as a place of God. Levinas' hermeneutics of kenosis* (Dordrecht et al.: Springer 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. M. Hénaff, *Der Preis der Wahrheit*, op. cit., 209.

<sup>53</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI 7, 15, 19: „διδόντος εκείνου ἃ μὴ εἶχεν αὐτός“ (Plotinus, *Opera*, ed. P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)); cited and commented upon in L. Tengelyi, "On the border of phenomenology and theology," in H. Ruin and J. Bornemark (eds.), *Phenomenology and religion: New fronts* (Södertörn: Södertörn University library press 2010), pp. 17-34, here p. 26.

<sup>54</sup> See J.-L. Marion, *The erotic phenomenon*, op. cit., p. 79; the formula appears several times indeed; a critical interpretation of this hypothesis can be found in C. Gschwandtner, "Love as a declaration of war? On the absolute character of love in Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of eros," in: N. Wirzba and B. E. Benson (eds.), *Transforming philosophy and religion: Love's wisdom* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University press), pp. 185-201.

<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., E. Levinas, *Otherwise than being*, op. cit., p. 162; the issue is explored by J. Llewelyn, *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2002), pp. 76-7; and very comprehensively by C. Beals, *Levinas and the Wisdom of Love*. (Waco: Baylor University Press 2007).

<sup>56</sup> To insist on the univocity of love, as Marion does (cf., e.g., *The erotic phenomenon*, op. cit., p. 222), does not resolve this problem. It rather demonstrates that violence is not to be misunderstood as a contingent part in the actualization of the semantics of religious communication but is rather intrinsically related to its "essence" – which does not at all entail that all religious practice is necessarily violent but only that it always involves a confrontation with this potential, too.

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In one way or the other, the articles assembled in this special issue revolve around the irreducible ambiguity of the gift that has been explored in a few directions in this introduction. Be it that they meditate upon the surreptitiously claimed unambiguous status of the gift in terms of sacrifice in Girard (Hagedorn), on the seemingly unified "big ontological principle of love" in Sartre (Welten), on the underexposed relationship between gift and force in Derrida (Raschke), on the inconspicuousness of givenness as such from Heidegger to Marion (Alvis), or on the intersections of the gift with technics and politics in Heidegger (Steinbock), or, finally, on the claimed powers of speculative reason to come to terms with the philosophical provocation of the gift and its sacrificial logic in general (Cohen)—they altogether give an account of the gift that does not avoid its both basically constitutive, yet irreducibly ambiguous role in the constitution of community, religion, and politics.

The articles date back to a conference on "Violence and the gift: challenging continental philosophy of religion" that took place 25-26 April 2014 at the *Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen* (Vienna, Austria), which had been organized jointly by the editors of this volume. On this occasion, we would like to thank the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for its financial support (FWF P 23255-G19); the general editors of JCRT for accepting our special issue proposal; and all the contributors for their willingness to contribute.

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