

## ○ ABOUT GIFTS: DERRIDA, SCRIPTURE, EARTH

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In recent times, the question of the gift has become a hot topic across a range of disciplines. Jacques Derrida was a key instigator: he disclosed the gift's paradoxical or aporetic nature: it is both gratuitous and circular, excessive and reciprocal. An exemplary and decisive textual site of this duality is the Bible, where gift/ing is expressed according to extreme figures like grace and bribery – and much in between. But an examination of the gift should also move beyond the world of the text to the world itself. And so, we ask: 'What if creation is a gift? How should we respond to the Earth?'

One of the hottest academic discourses in recent times has been the question of the gift. It has been a source of debate across the humanities, especially for disciplines like philosophy, anthropology, and theology. Jacques Derrida is the pivotal figure here: the publication of *Given Time* in the early 1990s caused a bit of a stir with its scandalous problematization of one of our most treasured and – one would think – straightforward phenomena, problematised to the extent that Derrida could be misread as insisting that there is no gift – hence, the scandal. Why is the gift a problem? While it is ordinarily understood as that which is given gratuitously – without condition – there is nevertheless always an exchange of some kind, ranging from explicitly circular responses like gratitude, thanksgiving, and counter-gifting, to more subtle reciprocations, like the reinforcement of the gift-giver's identity (Derrida 1992, p. 13).

Giving credit where credit's due, I would propose that Derrida's originality lies not so much with a 'discovery' of this irreducible duality, but with his rigorous philosophical articulation of what, I suspect, many of us have known (or intuited) all along: that the gift is not so pure or unconditional, or, perhaps more accurately, that it is both pure and impure, conditional and unconditional, linear and reciprocal. One example suffices: we bring a bottle of wine to a dinner party: the wine is a gift, but it is also expected and exchanged – for a meal. Expectation and exchange, on the one hand, coincide with autonomy and gratuity, on the other. As annoying as it may sound to minds bred on the logic of the either/or (Aristotle lives on), the gift appears to be an irresolvable paradox or aporia: it is constituted by two irreducibly contradictory or heterogeneous elements or sets of elements: on the one hand, excess, linearity, gratuity, etc., and, on the other, exchange, circularity, gratitude, and so on.

Now, one of the most outstanding literary sites disclosing the aporetic structure of the gift in all its dumbfounding doublesidedness is the Bible. Acknowledging that one can never be acquainted with *all* the existing literature on a subject – even in the Age of Google and ProQuest – I am unaware of any studies that have broached the question of the gift in Scripture according to a Derridean problematic – in other words, according to the gift's stunningly aporetic nature. If this is the case, it is both surprising and expected. Surprising, not only because one would think that the traditional preoccupation with grace – the 'pure' gift par excellence – would elicit this kind of investigation, but also in light of the contemporary fascination with the gift – though one should be patient with the lag (which is finally beginning to be bridged) between critical theory and biblical studies. But the non-treatment of the question of biblical gifts should, on the

other hand, be expected, for the gift's apparent simplicity, combined with its ubiquity, masks a duality which could only perhaps be readily discerned after *Given Time*.

Allow me to attempt this kind of undertaking. However, for two reasons, I cannot take up this question with any authority or detail. First of all, my specialty lies with philosophy of religion and ecocriticism rather than biblical studies, so my survey of Scripture remains tentative. (Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated shortly, even the non-specialist can quite easily identify and explicate the gift's doubleness as it appears in the Bible.) Second, my brief analysis will be employed in the service of ecology – specifically, outlining a few aporetically informed thoughts on our responses to the gift of the Earth – and so I will be relatively brief with my biblical analysis.<sup>1</sup>

To begin with, the term 'gift' is an astonishing scriptural example of a word saturated in plurivocity. *Young's Analytical Concordance* identifies twenty-one variant meanings (Young 1982, p. 390). I cite here some of the most diverse semantic categories assembled under the rubric of 'gift': the gift as reward (*eshkar*, e.g., Psalm 72.10); as offering (*minchah*, 2 Samuel 8.2); as bribe (*terumah*, Proverbs 29.4); as impure (*nedebh*, Ezekiel 16.33); desired (*doma*, e.g., Matthew 7.11); the specifically material gift (*doron*, Revelation 11.10); and variations of the 'free gift' denoting a spiritual gift (*dorea*, Acts 2.38; or *dorema*, Romans 5.16) or grace (*charisma*, 1 Corinthians 7.7). Sometimes the gift is identified as absolutely conditional (such as a bribe or sacrifice) and sometimes as purely unconditional (such as grace). Hence, one is faced with quite a dilemma: biblically, the term 'gift' is so semantically diverse it seems to defy definition. But, in light of a recognition of the gift's aporeticity, we may negotiate all of these evidently disparate and contradictory meanings and nuances according to the gift's two basic elements or aspects: excess and exchange.

We begin with conditional gifts. In Deuteronomy 16.17, for instance, the command is given: 'Each of you *must* bring a gift in *proportion* to the way [Yahweh] your God has blessed you' (NIV; all biblical emphases added). And the following Yahwist directive is stipulated in Ezekiel 20.40: 'For on my holy mountain... I will *require* your contributions and the choicest of your gifts' (NRSV).<sup>2</sup> Consider the vocabulary of force and restitution: 'must', 'require', 'proportion'. Ezekiel himself identifies a relationship between certain acts of gifting with bribery and defilement; speaking for Yahweh, he proclaims: 'Gifts are given to all whores; but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from all around for your whorings' (Ezekiel 16.33). Isaiah also connects the bribe with the gift: 'Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts' (Isaiah 1.23).

Conditional gifts are not limited to the First Testament. For example, when Paul thanks the Philippians for their generous gifting, he explains: 'I have been *paid in full* and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent...' (Philippians 4.18). This verse is constituted by a language and logic of economic exchange: having been 'paid in full', satisfaction registers upon receipt of the gifts. The Philippians' gifts have balanced an account: 'Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account' (Philippians 4.17). The Philippians' generosity towards an apostle of Christ seems to be earning them credit in heaven.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, some gifts are more demanding than others, but the examples cited here – and there are more where they came from – are conditional: the gift is owed, expected, demanded, or rewarded. Furthermore, as Derrida himself has noted, this kind of heavily circular

gifting – gifting with ‘strings attached’ – aptly reflects the binding nature of religion: *religare*, to bind (Derrida 1992, p. 137).

Now, such blatant conditionality is strikingly contradictory for those of us – perhaps all of us? – who identify the gift in its gratuity. But it is Scripture itself that announces – perhaps even inaugurates? – the unconditional gift. Even the debt-laden First Testament signals this kind of donation: for example, at Esther 2.18 we are told that King Ahasuerus ‘gave gifts with royal liberality’ to his people upon their marriage. This liberality signals a gifting unmotivated or less motivated by a logic of circularity. A second text is more telling: Ecclesiastes 5.18-19 wisely (and somewhat hedonistically?) urges us to enjoy the gift of life: ‘This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he [sic] enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God’. In this instance, and whether the Ecclesiastician intentionally realises it or not, the gift’s gratuity is reflected in the wise call to enjoy it rather than return it or feel obliged by it. The gift’s strings, in this instance, are denied, obscured, or complicated by the delight the gift evokes.

I return to the question of enjoyment as a response to the (Earth-)gift shortly, but what is presently worth noting is that these rather rare First-Testamental moments indicate a more gracious gifting – a giving without condition. Of course, the spontaneity of the gift emerges most clearly in the Second Testament with its repeated references to grace. Grace is, after all, the unconditional, unilateral gift par excellence, freely given by the divine to purportedly undeserving creatures. In Ephesians 2.8-9, Paul declares: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is *not your own doing*; it is the gift from God – *not the result from works*, so that no one may boast’. Here the gift is not tied to the receiver’s enterprise. This gift is not involved in exchange economy or tied up in cause-and-effect. The grace-gift is given just for the hell of it.

However, we shouldn’t be too hasty in adjudging and admiring grace as a pure and simple gift, for it too does not elude the gift’s doublebindedness. Statements pertaining to this exemplary unconditional gift nevertheless disclose the gift’s entanglement in circularity, thereby adding credence to (or perhaps inaugurally indicating?) the gift’s doublehandedness. For instance, the Christic logic in Luke’s Gospel, on the one hand, overturns the notion of giving in strictly reciprocal and equivalent terms: ‘If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? ... But love your enemies, do good, and [gift], expecting nothing in return’ (Luke 6.35a).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this subversive logic immediately reverts to an economic rationale, for this kind of giving nevertheless earns divine credit: ‘Your reward will be great...’ (Luke 6.35b). Here, the two logics (gratuity and reward) appear side by side – aporetically. Of course, let us not ignore the radicality of ‘expecting nothing in return’, considering that the logic of expectation governs the First Testament and its culture/s (a logic which also governs contemporary society, where capitalism is all about expectation of returns).<sup>5</sup> And so, despite the reversion to calculation, one nevertheless glimpses the subversive logic of unidirectional gifting, which is also evidenced in the call for countless forgiving (Matthew 18.21-22).

Chapter nine of Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians also bespeaks the gift’s paradoxicality; 2 Corinthians 9.5-7 reads: ‘I thought it *necessary to urge* the brothers [sic] to go on ahead to you, and *arrange in advance* for this bountiful gift that you have *promised*, so that it may be

ready as a *voluntary gift* and not as an *extortion*. The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you *must* give as you have *made up your mind*, not *reluctantly* or under *compulsion*, for God loves a *cheerful giver*. This particular passage on the gift is marked by a command, a calculation, and a reward. Despite Paul's plea for freeing up the gift, he encourages a now-classic economic formula: *reaping what is sown*. A third instance of the entanglement of gratuity and circularity is one of my favorites: it occurs at 1 Corinthians 9.15 when Paul declares: 'Thanks be to God for [God's] indescribable gift!' This exquisite verse, whereby the gift is described as 'indescribable', illustrates the gift's aporeticity, for Paul offers thanksgiving for a gift that nevertheless exceeds or eludes return.

Now, why am I so interested in identifying entangled statements such as the ones cited above? First of all, if we acknowledge that a culturally decisive text like the Bible informs how and what one thinks about the gift (particularly if one is a believer), then it should be examined in order to help account for our thinking in this regard. Hence, an investigation into the history of this word and phenomenon (which provides an appropriate starting-point for a contemporary thinking of the creation-gift) requires the kind of retracing represented above. And what does this undertaking reveal? The Bible discloses the tension in the gift and thereby validates a Derridean-aporetic approach: Scripture clearly and strongly promotes both aspects of the gift – although, with the espousal of grace, one may propound that it has subsequently informed and fortified the gift's gratuity as its definitive element. But our referral to entangled biblical texts nevertheless acts as a reminder that the gift is indeed a paradox which cannot be reduced to its gratuity.

My survey of biblical texts also discloses – by way of its absence – another important point: Scripture does not refer to creation as a gift (Manolopoulos 2003, ch. 2). This is surprising insofar as this axiom is (or, has become) a very ingrained religious notion: after all, would any Christian (or, perhaps more broadly, any theist) deny that creation is a *donum Dei*? In light of this absence, any reflection on the creation-gift from a 'quasi-theological' perspective (a perspective elucidated as I proceed) requires a nuanced approach, precisely because the creation-gift is not scripturally stated or explicated. And so, informed by a biblically-substantiated Derridean-aporetic approach, what would be involved in quasi-theologically rethinking 'creation as a gift'?

To begin with, the phrase itself requires much unpacking – and, once again, we shall be unfairly-but-necessarily brief (for a detailed discussion, refer to Manolopoulos 2003, ch. 1). First of all, let us consider the words 'as a gift'. The term 'as' is absolutely crucial here: it signals the suppositional, hermeneutical, undecidable nature of the proposition: we are not arguing that creation's giftness is a certified fact but rather proposing that what-is *may* be a gift. In other words, the statement refers to a *possibility* that may *also* be an actuality. While we know that the cosmos is a given, we cannot know whether it is also a gift – all the while recognizing or remembering that the proposition's status as a possibility and as an interpretation of what-is is by no means inferior in any sense: any imposition of inferiority would be generated by the longstanding and unjustified privileging of actuality over possibility, of decision over undecidability, of knowledge over faith, and so on.<sup>6</sup> (The recognition and affirmation of undecidability and possibility are elements of the post-dogmatic, quasi-theological position presented here.)

The 'a' in the phrase 'creation as a gift' also signals the recognition that we are not denying the possibility of gifts other than material creation. This caveat ensures that something like, for instance, divine grace (or whatever else may be immaterial) can certainly be figured as a gift, assuming one may be able to distinguish – which is not the same as dividing or separating – the material from the immaterial. However, the present focus lies on material creation – a focus motivated by the two-pronged task of redressing the theologico-philosophical preoccupation with the immaterial (God, soul, ideas/forms, mind, reason, etc.) by addressing and embracing corporeal things.

But what, 'exactly', is meant by 'creation'? It is here employed in its broadest sense: the continually creative, open-ended matrix of material entities in their interrelatedness and individuation. To begin with, one of the definitions of 'creation' in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* is 'creatures collectively'. This phrase folds two features of the word. First, it denotes creation 'as a whole' – although this collectivity is not crudely construed here as a closed collective: 'creation' is employed with a recognition of, and appreciation for, its *dynamic and open-ended* nature, marked as it is by relational and creative corporeal beings; this point opens up a second feature: 'creation' encompasses 'creatures'. How are 'creatures' understood here? Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of 'creation' as it is defined here is its thoroughgoing inclusiveness: 'creation' stands here for *all* corporeal 'creatures' or entities. 'Creation' refers to the *phusis* ('the nature, inborn quality, property or constitution') of other-than-human 'Nature' (mountains, tress, etc.) and human beings, *but also* to the *technê* ('art, skill, regular method of making a thing') of *all* things.<sup>7</sup> Not only is 'creation' here extended beyond elemental nature, but also beyond human culture. The term refers to *all* material things, including those things that are manufactured by humans, but also those things produced by other-than-human others. After all, as Alice Walker points out: 'even tiny insects in the South American jungle know how to make plastic...' (Walker 1988, p. 148).

The word 'creation' therefore encompasses both the natural and the artificial; it includes the primordial and the manufactured. According to the present work, 'creatures collectively' therefore not only refers to mountains or mites, trees or cells, but also to the most spectacular and 'mundane' human and other-than-human constructions: skyscrapers, chairs, plastic bags, ant-plastic, and so on. Now, when this all-inclusive definition of what-is is paired with the gift, we come to the surprising and confronting position that giftness would mark each and every being – including humanly manufactured things. Straightaway, we recognise that this pairing thereby exceeds distinctions like nature/culture or *phusis/technê*. Giftness becomes, in a sense (and I nuance the following statement shortly), a common denominator, transcending determinations like 'natural' and 'humanly made'. This appears strange and challenging: while we may consider things like our lives, friendships, majestic mountains, and beautiful sunsets as gifts, who would ordinarily consider mundane (*mundanus*, of this world) or banal humanly constructed things like chairs or ashtrays as gifts?

Indeed, this radically eco-egalitarian proposition (that *all* material things are gifts) immediately raises an important objection: all things are considered gifts, but how can destructive things – like bombs that kill and industrially/technologically generated pollution that disfigures the Earth – be considered gifts? Briefly (for our aim here is not to provide a detailed *apologia* of this gift-inspired eco-democratism, but to outline a praxis informed by the gift-aporia), the following

points should be noted. First, to propose that a thing is a gift does not mean that a thing is *exclusively* reducible to its giftness: a thing may be a gift but it may *also* be more than and otherwise than a gift. While giftness may be a common denominator, it does not thereby erase or cancel other determinations of a thing: its giftness is *but one* of its many possible and/or actual aspects (givenness, beingness, objectness, etc.). My contention is that humanly produced entities (as well as humans themselves) are gifts – but gifts that *also* disfigure and/or destroy other gifts. The gift's duality in this respect is reflected in its etymology: the Greek and Latin, *dosis*, of which 'dose' is derived, can mean a present, a poison, or a cure; and in German, *Gift* means 'poison' (Horner 2001, p. 9-11; Derrida 1992, p. 81).<sup>8</sup>

As strange as it sounds, what is crucial to note here is that gifts like plastics and bombs are composed of mysterious, miraculous matter (and one can recall thinkers from Blaise Pascal [1995] to Freya Mathews [1996] here), but these things' destructive elements derive from a complex matrix of human calculation, intervention, construction, and operation.<sup>9</sup> In other words, an entity can only be construed as a non-gift if it is measured according to the limited category of its human conception, transformation, and deployment. According to this restrictive logic, a bomb-thing would be a bomb and nothing else/more. The thing's irreducible mystery or excess is ignored according to such a constricted perspective, which is, admittedly, the dominant (and domineering) perspective of instrumentalizing anthropocentrism. This kind of narrow-mindedness is one of anthropocentrism's crowning 'achievements': a thing is construed exclusively as a utensil! Perhaps this would account for any irritation or hostility that a radical eco-democratism may incite: it challenges the prevailing view. Indeed, the prevailing view is so ingrained that calls for a truly ecological democracy even seem 'counter-intuitive'.

To consider the matrix of creation-things as gifts is to challenge our entrenched instrumentalism. Of course, I am not suggesting that we continue on the current path of designing and manufacturing bombs or Styrofoam cups: what is being proposed and stressed is that *all* matter – even when it is manipulated by violent, polluting humans – is marked by giftness. In sum, we should acknowledge that gift-things are multi-faceted: while a thing is a gift at least in terms of its materiality, it can *also* be destructive according to its human intention, production, and operation.

A third feature of 'creation' noted above was that it is a continually creative matrix of beings: Earth *poieticizes* or brings-forth. Now, the notion of creativity raises a number of broad, complex, and correlated issues, which can only be summarily treated for reasons disclosed as we proceed. Most importantly, in relation to radical gift theory, one should at least register the question of the relation and/or non-relation between creating something and gifting something: in our everydayness, one may create something and not gift it, and vice versa. But what of creation itself? From a conventional Christian perspective, wouldn't God's creation of the universe be in some sense correlated to its gifting?

This perspective requires unpacking and questioning. First of all, going by Genesis 1, creation is a *co-creative* manifold of interplaying processes, marked by interaction and invitation between the divine (*Elohim*) and the deep (*tehom*), Gen 1.2, leading to a lavish dissemination of beings, Gen 1.3ff (Keller 2003). As much as we humans are able to 'think' a creativity which precedes and exceeds our thinking, co-creation is irreducible to one kind of event: it stresses interrelation between deity and primordial materiality, a calling-forth which is a letting-be, and a multiplying

individuation. This biblical perspective already calls into question the predominant theological figuration of God as a mastercraftsman who creates *ex nihilo*. This perspective confounds the notion of a unilateral creativity, which would also confound the notion of a one-way gifting – assuming there may be some kind of correlation between cosmic gifting and creating. Indeed, this perspective confounds the ‘gift’/‘gift-giver’ distinction, for it already presupposes the Aristotelian maker/made schema.<sup>10</sup>

In light of these imposing ontological questions, we suspend them for the time being, focusing instead on the ontic (being concerned with beings rather than the creation/gifting of their being): such a bracketing is both epistemically humble and ensures that our focus remains on ‘creatures collectively’. (This focus is another deliberate feature of our ‘quasi-theological’ perspective.)

We are now able to begin to think the pairing of ‘creation’ and ‘gift’ and ‘aporia’ (creation-gift-aporia). Having received Derrida’s gift of thinking the gift in all its heterogeneity – a heterogeneity openly disclosed in Scriptural verses – we may now faithfully work through what it may mean to figure what-is as a gift. Before I offer a few thoughts regarding ways in which we intentional agents respond (and should respond), it is important to note some of the ways in which the creation-gift’s excess precedes and overcomes us. In other words, the gift precedes and exceeds the recipient. For us, this precedence and overwhelmingness is expressed by phenomena like astonishment, wonder, and silence (*hesychia*) on behalf of the recipient (Manolopoulos 2003, ch. 4). One of the most ecologically significant things about these kinds of pre-subjective ‘reactions’ is that they are *very* ecological: by definition, this passivity allows the world to be, rather than being mastered, controlled, commodified, and disfigured by us humans. If anything, we gift-recipients are, in a sense, acted upon *by* the creation-gift – in the most wonderful (and sometimes challenging ways) – rather than acting upon *it* in often disfigurative and destructive ways.

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

*Oscillation* represents this kind of paradoxical movement, characterised as it is by a rotating action that is nevertheless steadfast; according to the *OED*, to oscillate is ‘To swing backwards and forwards, like a pendulum; to vibrate; to move to and fro between two points. To fluctuate between two opinions, principles, purposes, etc., each of which is held in succession; to vary between two limits which are reached alternately’. Unceasing alternation saves the gift’s irresolvable – and, as I explain shortly, *productive* – tension, reflecting and preserving its giftness, rather than becoming fixed by one of its elements (fixation thereby limiting it to the limits of grace or commerce). Oscillation’s both/and thereby guards against exclusion and reification. It does not bias: it is a double movement that does not favor one of the elements at the exclusion of the other, for any exclusion dissolves the gift itself. Rather than taking sides, oscillation takes both sides. Note, too, the phrase ‘held in succession’: this movement is marked by a recognition that

gifting and its negotiation occur over time. Temporality is thereby respected; like gifting, oscillation takes time.

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

And so, something like an oscillating interactivity with the world (which includes ourselves, other humans, non-human others, and humanly manufactured things) is one that would properly reflect and respond to the creation-gift-aporia. An acknowledgment of the world-gift's aporeticity would make room for a variety of competing responses, and since this interactivity would be governed by the maintenance of the gift-tension, it would disrupt and inform the more ecologically problematic aspects of these responses. In other words, there is something of the ethical and disciplined involved in a vacillating responsiveness, each element informing and restricting the other. How so? Some of the fundamental intentional responses reflecting and respecting the gift's paradoxicality include letting-be, playing-with, utilization, and reciprocity (Manolopoulos 2003, ch. 4).

I noted above the pre-conscious reaction of letting-be, but it can also be a response – or, more accurately, a response-without-response – from the intentional subject. This exemplary reception allows the gift to appear and be as gift. In its recognition of the gift's circularity, letting-be is akin to 'returning' it – although, in this context, there is nothing insulting about such an act, for it saves the gift from responses that are disfigurative and destructive (instrumentalization, commodification, consumption, etc.). By letting it be, we allow creation to 'grow old', as Mathews wonderfully puts it, rather than exhausting it and polluting it (Mathews 1999). Letting-be is radically non-interventionist. It is, without a doubt, the most ecological response. It disrupts the more problematic aspects of alternative reactions (discussed below). Letting the Earth-gift be also corresponds to the divine letting-be which marks the creativity enunciated in Genesis 1: the biblical 'Let there be...' indicates an understanding that *Elohim* opens up a 'space' or possibility for the self-disclosure of things. Divine creativity/gifting may perhaps be figured as a letting-be (gift) that possibilises inter-corporeal letting-be (gift).

Now, when it comes to humanity, there should, of course, be *way much more* passivity towards the Earth. However, the notion of oscillation reminds us that the gift warrants a heterogeneous receptivity – not to mention the fact that, as corporeal-beings-in-relation, letting-be could not possibly be our one and only response. A second key reaction is joyous interactivity,

whereby the gift is not treated non-interventionally or instrumentally, but where the ‘object’ or ‘end’ of the interaction is play. The ‘objective’ is rather purposeless – a terribly threatening thing for us rational-instrumental-managerial capitalists and socialists still overcoming our neoplatonic asceticism and puritanism. A playful response responds to the gratuity of the gift: take it, have fun!

Interestingly, this kind of playful, hedonistic perspective also marks certain biblical texts. To begin with, the ecotheological exegete, Catherine Keller, proposes that the biblical reaction to creation in Genesis (‘And God saw that it was good’) may not be ‘mere self-congratulation’ but ‘spontaneous delight...’: joy is presented as a divine response to creation (Keller 2003, p. 195).<sup>11</sup> Another eco-biblical exegete, Carol A. Newsom, discerns a kind of *oikological jouissance* in the Book of Job: ‘This new image is one of God as a power for life, balancing the needs of all creatures, not just humans, cherishing freedom, full of fierce love and delight for each thing without regard for its utility, acknowledging the deep interconnectedness of death and life, restraining and nurturing each element in the ecology of creation’ (Newsom 1992, p. 136; also refer to Keller 2003, ch. 7). Contrary to any perverted, puritanical asceticism, certain (rare) moments in Scripture therefore refer to divinity’s recreational interactivity with creation. Furthermore, humans are also urged to enjoy creation-gifts. Ecclesiastes 5.18-19 is remarkable in that it urges us to enjoy material things, for this ability to enjoy the fruits of our labours is itself a divine gift: ‘it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he [*sic*] enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God’. Of course, even a biblically-sanctioned recreational interactivity with creation can – and often is – excessively unecological. (The ever-expanding ‘snow-fields’ come to mind.) Hence, this response may become ecologically gentler by staying in tension with letting-be and other circular-reflecting reactions.

Having referred to evidently eco-noble receptions and interactions like letting-be and play, one may expect well-meaning ecologists to be offended by the allowance of an instrumental use of the creation-gift. However, staying true to the gift’s aporeticity, responding in an instrumental way reflects the gift’s gratuity: it is there for the taking. From a radically aporetic perspective, an openness towards a certain kind of instrumentality (as opposed to eco-destructive instrumentalism) should not be abandoned, even if abandonment were possible. The ability to ‘use’ the gift reflects and embraces both the element of gratuity and that of identification. If the gift is identified in all its gratuity, then the givee is able to utilise it. As surprising or even troubling as this claim may sound (and justifiably so – hence the quotation marks), an instrumental use of the gift is thoroughly appropriate: instrumentality is emblematic of the gift’s circularity. In other words, the gift-recipient not only responds to the gift in ways that reflect the gift’s excess, but also in ways that reflect the gift’s aspect of exchange: use is one such way. Hence, according to an aporetic thinking of gifting, there is a place for industry and technology. There is, for instance, a *place* for logging. The appropriateness of using the gift is confirmed in the phenomenon of human gifting: when one person gifts a gift to another, the non-use of the gift would, in all probability, offend the gift-giver. If creation is gift-ed, its use by the giver reflects and respects the element of recognition in the gift. Of course, the ecological crisis reveals what happens when our ‘use’ of the creation-gift turns to *abuse*: according to the logic and language of the present

aporetics, this devastating transformation occurs when any oscillational reception of, and relation with, the gift is halted and the gift is *exclusively* figured as a mere product without excess. Without any acknowledgment of its excess, the gift-thing is exclusively received in its utility – a reception that issues in its abuse.

Fascinatingly, one may locate or figure the call for an oscillation between use and a saving/letting-be in Genesis 2.15: '[Yahweh] God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it'.<sup>12</sup> 'To till' is to cultivate or produce; 'to keep' (in this particular context) is to save or sustain. The command is given that there be a double movement in terms of the way the creation-gift is received: on the one hand, there should be a certain agricultural *use* of the garden-gift; on the other, the gift should be 'kept' or *saved*, allowed to let-be.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, what happens when there isn't a mediated utility is the abusive forms of use manifested in hyper-commodification and hyper-consumption: this extreme and extremely disfigurative and destructive utility utterly lacks any acknowledgment of gratuity's other – circularity. But if we were to recognise the gift-aporia as an aporia, then we would make room for an instrumentality that would also make room for competing practices, thereby restricting an ecologically devastating instrumentalism like techno-consumerism. In a severely capitalised world, however, the opposite is true: almost everything is figured instrumentally almost all of the time.

Now, a fourth category of responses is that of exchange or reciprocity, which incorporates a variety of reactions, such as thanksgiving, indebtedness, and paying-back. This category is imperative on theoretical, ecological, and theological grounds. First of all, even though we lovers of gratuity love to privilege the freedom of the gift, the gift's identification is integral to it and will inevitably produce responses: the gift cannot be strictly linear. Ecologically, a recognition of the gift's circularity ensures that the creation-gift is 'returned' to some degree, a return which involves letting it be and saving it. The response of exchange and reciprocity counteracts any responses evoked by the element of gratuity which can easily slide to a squandering or wastefulness which reaches its zenith with hyper-capitalism. An acknowledgment of the gift's circularity prompts us to redress any receptivity informed by a misplaced (but often well-meaning) emphasis on the gift's graciousness.

Theologically, the response of return ensures that, whilst a reaction like enjoyment has a certain secular-hedonism about it (the gift is enjoyed for its own sake), the gift's aporeticity also opens up the religious or spiritual response of thanking any perceived gift-giver (God/Earth/*tehom*). If creation is a gift, religious return should oscillate with its secular enjoyment. Whilst the critique of religion as exemplar of return and indebtedness (heralded by the likes of Nietzsche) is undeniably valid and crucial, this response can be reconsidered in the larger context of the gift-aporia: while the gratuity of the gift has certainly been underplayed and the notion of indebtedness overemphasised, any simple reversal or one-sidedness would not sufficiently reflect the gift's aporeticity. A secular enjoyment (affirmation, celebration) should certainly be emphasised, but indebtedness and obligation (religious or otherwise) remains a proper response to the creation-gift. Secular joy responds to its gratuity; religious gratitude reflects its circularity. The gift-aporia calls for both kinds of responses; oscillation responds accordingly (Manolopoulos 2003).

Now, radical gift theory does not only make room for the place of both secularity and religiosity (as paradoxical as this appears), but the latter can also be figured ecologically: religion and

spirituality are ecological insofar as they involve reciprocity, gratitude, and thanksgiving; this responsiveness may allow our interactivity with the Earth-gift to be gentler.

And so, by aporetically interpreting and oscillationally interacting with the Earth as a gift, the greater the likelihood that we may save it.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Elements of the following discussion are excerpted and based on my doctoral dissertation, 'If Creation is a Gift: Towards an Eco/theo/logical Aporetics (2003). I also thank the present work's anonymous referees for their insightful recommendations.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, I henceforth utilise the *NRSV*. (*New Revised Standard Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers; 1993.)

<sup>3</sup> The *New International Version* reads: 'Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be *credited to your account*'. *Bible Gateway* website. Gospel Communications International (USA) <<http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?passage=Philippians+4:2-23andversion=NIV>> accessed August 4, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Jarvis notes that the original Greek and Latin word translated in this verse as 'lend' more accurately correspond to the verb form of 'gift': *dapizete, date* (Jarvis 2001, p. 74).

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Selbie confirms that the conditional gift continues to prevail in Eastern cultures: 'So firmly established is the custom in the East of giving a present upon certain conditions that the latter is demanded as a right' (Selbie 1958, p. 173). As I noted above, this prevalence is not assumed here to be an exclusively 'Eastern' phenomenon.

<sup>6</sup> For texts that examine the significance of undecidability in philosophico-theological contexts, refer to Caputo (1997), Horner (2001), Manolopoulos (2003) and Manolopoulos (2002).

<sup>7</sup> The definitions for *phusis* and *technê* are cited from Liddell and Scott (1958, p. 702).

<sup>8</sup> The Greek *dorodokeo* means 'to accept as a present, to take as a bribe' (Liddell and Scott 1958, p. 187); also refer to Benveniste (1997, pp. 33-42).

<sup>9</sup> In different ways, both Pascal and Mathews bring to our attention the inner infinity and mystery of things, i.e., one cannot get to the bottom of things; refer to Pascal (1995, e.g. pp. 60-61) and Mathews (1996, p. 56).

<sup>10</sup> I thank the anonymous referee who brought to my attention the fact that distinguishing between a creator/s (God, chaos, the cosmos itself, etc.) and the created itself already relies on the normative ontological model with which the *creatio ex nihilo* is aligned. (Refer to, e.g., Castoriadis [1991]). What should be noted, however, is that the *ex nihilo* model should not be discounted outright: if there is some kind of correlation between cosmic creativity and gifting, then one-way creativity possibly corresponds to the linearity that marks gifting (Manolopoulos 2003, Ch. 1).

<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Moltmann (1985) figures the God who 'rests' on the seventh day (Gen 2.3-4) as the God who celebrates: 'The resting God, the celebrating God, the God who rejoices over his [*sic*] creation...' (p. 6). One is also reminded here of the beautiful, powerful line by Angelus Silesius: 'God plays with creation' (p. 198).

<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew term for 'till', *bad*, may be more accurately translated as 'serve' – which refigures the verse as radically ecological (i.e., to serve the garden/earth); refer to, e.g., Hiebert (2000, p. 140ff). However, I bracket the question of 'precise' translation (if such a thing is possible) for the sake of illuminating the notion of eco-oscillation.

I noticed the oscillational character of this verse as it appears in the NRSV translation when reading Vasileios (1996). Pioneering ecotheologians like Moltmann (1985, p. 30) and Joseph Sittler attend to this eco-affirmative biblical verse.

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