



THE
GIFTING
GOD

A
TRINITARIAN
ETHICS OF EXCESS

STEPHEN H. WEBB

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A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess

Stephen H. Webb

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Many of the people I thanked in earlier works should be thanked again. Indeed, this project builds on my previous books, *Blessed Excess; Religion and the Hyperbolic Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) and *Re-Figuring Theology; The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), in which I examined the rhetoric of excess from a formal, structural perspective, showing the isomorphic relationship between certain religious works and ideas and the trope of exaggeration. In those books I was content to play the role of the literary critic, culling examples of a neglected figure of speech from both texts and arguments and hoping to show that the importance of hyperbole is not limited to single statements or the flourish of an occasional embellishment.

Although in both books some substantive theological reflections emerged from my interest in rhetoric, once I achieved some distance from them I became dissatisfied with their limited focus. It is too easy, as many postmodernists demonstrate, to brandish the category of excess without reflecting on the problems of social structure and moral duty. In fact, postmodernism does have a moral edge; it can be defined as an obsession with excess to the extent that excess upsets our meta-physical desires for control and disables our personal quests for domination. Excess decenters the subject and thus makes room for new

kinds of otherness. Frequently, however, postmodernism has been accused of practicing a negative theology that resists substituting a constructive position for the celebration of hermeneutical ambiguity and pluralism. By focusing on the phenomenon of gift giving, I have tried to find that place where excess and ethics intersect, where, that is, excess, taken to its own extremes, contains a corresponding ethics, one that is congruent both with postmodernist fascinations with incompleteness and otherness and with communitarian concerns for virtue and tradition. (I further explore the intersection of ethics and excess in a forthcoming book on theology and compassion for animals.)

William C. Placher was the most important contributor to my project. Bill continues to be my first (and best) reader, as well as a theologian whose praxis of giving has influenced more than the words on these pages. I already regret the few places in this book where I have not followed his advice. Steve Smith, Brad Stull, and Larry Bouchard gave me some wonderful suggestions and advice when I was revising this manuscript, just when I needed them most. Many of their comments made me realize how much more work I still want to do on these issues. The thrust of this project began as an essay, "A Hyperbolic Imagination: Theology and the Rhetoric of Excess," in *Theology Today* 50 (April 1993):56–67, and some of the paragraphs and phrases of that essay have been included in modified forms in this book.

The first draft of this book was written during the weekends of the spring of 1993 and a daily schedule of writing during that summer in Bloomington, Indiana, where my wife, Diane Timmerman, was completing her M.F.A. in theater. Her theater friends became my own, and their giving sustained my writing. Diane has taught me more about giving than any book simply by being the kind of person that I would like to become. In a way, this book is a result of taking her giving and trying to give it back in another form. This book is the gratitude that her giving has made. This book is also dedicated to the memory of Erik Tomusk (1959–1993), for whose life I am grateful and from whose death I learned that giving also means letting go.

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THE GIFTING GOD

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Introduction: Giving and Thinking

Everybody in the United States seems to be involved in a great debate about gift giving that has inestimable political ramifications. Now more than ever before, we need theological clarification about what generosity is and how giving should be formulated and practiced. Although private acts of donation are widely lauded as crucial for the health of our country, public acts of giving are coming under increasing scrutiny. On one side of the current debate, giving is the problem, and the solution demands an honest reconceptualization of generosity. To simplify an ongoing conversation, conservatives are arguing that giving must be connected to merit, that gifts should be earned. Generosity should be careful, calculated, measured by what it produces. The language of giving, in other words, should reflect the language of business and economics. A gift should be an investment. Otherwise, gifts are wasted, squandered; they create disorder and dependence, and thus giving threatens to become, ironically, immoral.

On the other side of the debate, giving is still presented as the solution to many problems, even though the pressure to articulate how giving works makes the supporters of generosity uncomfortable and hesitant. The liberal tradition persists in defending a giving without strings attached, without, that is, an explicit expectation of a return. Liberals are rightly guided by the insight that if generosity is not at least a bit disinterested (that is, uninterested in the repayment of the gift), then it is hardly generosity at all. Yet even liberal theoreticians of generosity acknowledge that giving must be connected to the common good—or at least constrained by a responsible community—in order for giving to achieve its ends.

These debates have not only theological analogues but also theological roots. How we think about God's giving will shape how we give to others, and how we think about giving in general will inform our theological reflections. This book sets out to put into dialogue various theories about giving and various portraits of God's benevolence. I hope to show that the two sides of this debate can be reconceived (perhaps even reconciled) if we think about giving from the proper (that is, trinitarian) theological perspective.

I first became aware of the fundamental problems associated with giving when, in an informal conversation with a few students at Wabash College several years ago, my attempt to defend the palpable reality of generosity was repeatedly rebuffed. These students took it for granted (that is, as a given) that any apparent act of giving was really (and obviously) driven by self-interest. Later, in a lecture I gave to the Wabash community, when I tried to develop the case for giving more formally, I encountered a similar resistance. Everybody seems to know that giving is calculated, not spontaneous, and structured (and thereby canceled) by the expectation of an equivalent return. The very pervasiveness of this assumption makes me suspicious. On the one hand, I wanted to congratulate and encourage my students for seeing the deeper reality hidden beneath mere appearances. After all, the distinction between reality and appearance is the primary methodological maneuver of any philosophy, the very foundation of critical reflection. On the other hand, this totalizing insight into the epiphenomenal structure of generosity was just too easy. It smacked more of cynicism than wisdom. The idea that exchange is the foundation of generosity is a quick or premature judgment, assumed and not earned, disconnected from lived experiences of successful or failed acts of giving.

Indeed, I am convinced that a great reversal has taken place in our thinking about giving: what was once hidden is now flaunted, and what was once accepted (given) is now always questioned (returned). The theoretical triumph of reimagining the motivation for generosity has led to a new orthodoxy with its own troubling consequences. Certainly, gift giving can be a sentimental and token gesture, a cloak for naked self-interest and a deceptive instrument of control and manipulation. Think, for example, about how the word *charity* has taken on so many negative connotations today. Doing good in our culture is getting harder, so perhaps it is comforting to believe that good cannot be done at all. Nevertheless, it is time to challenge the all-too-easy critiques of generosity in the name of something more troubling and demanding than cynicism alone.

Is it possible to conceptualize all of our acts of giving solely on the slim basis of self-centered agency? In a recent work, Walter Lowe has called such insights “ready-made Enlightenment” claims that have the form of critical thought but actually embody new myths and dogmas, claims that rationalize rather than disturb the status quo.¹ Likewise, Paul Piccone speaks of an “artificial negativity,” an opposition that is created by the dominant order as a way of generating a creativity that only perpetuates that order.² Any critique, too easily accepted and propagated, can become a hindrance to further thought and action. Criticism can function to limit the imagination and legitimate the present situation, as well as to alter and challenge that which is taken for granted. The deep truth of self-promotion that lies beneath the allegedly superficial surface of other-regard has become so conspicuous in our day that it is now crucial to ask what reality it, in turn, is concealing.

The most critical contemporary thinking, I believe, needs to recover the giving that our culture obscures behind a painfully barren monologue on self-interest. To accomplish this task, I have not endeavored to “save the appearances” (as Aristotle describes his method in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) of generosity but rather to investigate the possibility of that which has come to be seen as increasingly and plainly impossible. Here theology can play a helpful role. It is time for theology to question the questions of contemporary culture. Although theologians have a long tradition—linked with discussions of sin—of criticizing and limiting any individual’s claim to have acted generously, theology is essentially a responsive discipline, so the theologian must in the end resist the temptation to absolutize the critique of generosity, no matter how much that critique is dependent on (usually unacknowledged) theological resources. Theology, like any form of critical thought, refuses the appearance of self-sufficiency in the world, but it discounts appearances, running the risk of being ungrateful for all that is, only in order to awaken us to a greater magnitude of debt, a more original and amazing donation, and hence a higher order of gratitude. Theology, which narrows our perceptions of what is as a way to widen our imaginations of what might yet be, discovers the persistence of generosity and envisions the novelty of excessive giving even where the status quo of self-interest and exchange seems perpetually to prevail. Theology lures us into an unsuspecting abundance that liberates and transforms, freeing us from the incessant struggle for recognition and the duplicity of self-admiration.

A theologian writing about giving is thus always aware of a first giver, the givenness of all things, and the responsibility for returning

the gift. Indeed, to write about giving is itself an act caught up in the structure of donation and indebtedness, priority and dependence, so that how one writes—one's style—reflects what one wants to say. My desire is to respond to the problem of gift giving in a way that is receptive and grateful but not passive and idle. In fact, I want to render uncertain that which is usually taken for granted, which in this case is not the reality but the illusion of generosity. Yet, I do not want to idealize giving as something that is pure and untainted by self-interested motivation. To transvalue self-interested acts so that giving appears as the radical opposite of exchange is to disconnect the theological imagination from quotidian reality and to empty theological rhetoric of any referential content. Giving necessarily takes place in a context, so that it is never completely free of economics. Indeed, I want to show that giving has its own kind of economy by arguing that giving can create relationships of expectation and commitment without becoming another form of buying and selling. Giving does not need to be conceptualized as a solitary act; one can add to the gift without thereby subtracting from it. Thus, part of my argument will be that a gift accrues more giving, and the exemplification of this thesis requires me to try to give something back to giving by showing not only the complexity and difficulty but also the beauty and necessity of this seemingly simple act.

More specifically, this book is divided into two equal parts. The analytical part (which comprises the first two chapters) attempts to sort out, both sociologically and philosophically, the various problems that distort our culture's understanding of gift giving. Giving is an act that joins (at least) two people, and the dichotomy of two basic orientations—self and other—governs the debates about generosity. The result is a genuine dilemma or puzzle. Can the gift be for the other without being against the self, and can the gift that does not subtract from the self really add to the other? In other words, is there a way of relating the self to the other that escapes the polarity between selfishness and self-sacrifice? Are the self-interest and other-concern orientations mutually contradictory? The constructive task (which comprises chapters 3 and 4) is to affirm a giving that is other-oriented without being self-destructive. The true gift should speak of self and other together, in a single discourse or action that nevertheless accounts for the irreducible doubleness of this pair. The issue of the gift is the possibility of glimpsing an opening in which the other is present to the self, by an act that nonetheless begins with the self. Through the gift, the giver lets go of something in order to let the other be, and thus the self finds itself

elsewhere, in an event in which something different happens to the ordinary and everyday.

Part of the problem with my conversations with students pertained to vocabulary. Traditionally, the issue of giving was framed in psychological terms by the possibility of altruism and, conversely, the limits to egoism. This psychology has theological roots. Altruism is the secular equivalent to the religious category of sacrifice, just as egoism is another name for the sin of selfishness. Modern Western culture has undertaken a prolonged and massive rehabilitation of the terms *egoism* and *selfishness*, while the very purity of the ideas of altruism and sacrifice has become the easy target of ridicule and rejection. In this linguistic climate, the very grammar of giving is threatened. How can we speak about giving without invoking the theological vocabulary of sacrifice? Moreover, what is the plausibility of theology if *giving*—a term so closely related to grace—is illusory?

When I decided to write about these issues, I realized a new set of terms was needed. The framework for the problem of giving is, it seems to me, increasingly economic, not psychological. The logic of economics has successfully colonized and thus presently regulates what can and cannot be said about giving. Simply put, economic realists (or cynics) defend an economy of the self in which every expenditure is balanced by an equivalent appropriation. I give to you if, and only if, you give to me. Throughout my book, I call this perspective, which I introduce and analyze in chapter 1, the *model of exchange*. Although the circularity of this model (what is given always returns) can highlight the values of equality, responsibility, and reciprocity, this model more likely permits the cunning of self-interest to dominate every social interaction. Although I think giving should take place in a milieu of mutuality, I resist the idea that calculation cannot be displaced by spontaneity and generosity. Ontologizing exchange can be reassuring; exchange is, after all, the principal category of understanding operative in the modern Western world. To suspect all relationships of harboring exchange is to prove our own presuppositions final and universal. To think the other of exchange, we must bracket our own convenient expectations and prejudices.

Exchange has a place in giving, I decided, but only if it is contextualized by something else. The best opposition to the dominant model of exchange is not the old language of altruism and sacrifice but a discourse—what I call the *model of excess*—that is very contemporary and capable of disrupting the reduction of generosity to economics. Indeed, it is important to reflect on not only the rhetoric about giving but also

the rhetoric that *is* giving. At its best, gift giving signifies both a challenge to and a continuation of the model of exchange because it is an act of communication that both embellishes (in a trivial sense) and profoundly alters the ordinary and expected trading of goods and information. The rhetoric of the gift is the rhetoric of excess, the (im)possibility of saying more, doing more, and giving more than exchange encourages or permits. Our culture understands and values acts of excess as moments of rebellion against the predominance of economic exchange. The gift is exchange hyperbolized; it is, in fact, one of the basic forms of the trope of hyperbole. Excessive giving, understood theologically, has the potential to interrupt and disorient the training all of us receive in economizing our resources that ensures that what we give is equal to what we take.

This potential is not, of course, always realized. Whereas exchange seeks balance and equality at the price of calculating the good of the other only in terms of the good for the self, excessive giving stems from a strong self-affirmation that also risks overlooking the good of the other. I argue in the first two chapters that the attempt to circumvent the economics of giving by emphasizing excess inevitably trivializes and deflates the act of generosity; in fact, squandering (what I call excess that is not theologically shaped) is dependent on the economics it seeks to overcome. As some critics argue, gift giving is merely a way of embellishing or enhancing (in a way that repeats and reinforces) the unbreakable logic of barter and trade. Squandering attempts to negate the economics of the modern soul without affirming a constructive alternative. Excess provides a holiday from the rigor of exchange; conversely, exchange needs the release of excess in order to maintain itself as the primary model of agency in the modern, industrialized West. The question persists: Is the rhetoric of the gift mere rhetoric (form without content), or does it point to possibilities usually suppressed and ignored? Does giving give us something different or more of the same? Is excess merely another (no doubt more seductive) form of exchange, a different logo for the logos of calculation and reciprocity, or is there something *more* to giving? If so, what is the *more* on which giving depends?

Perhaps the cynicism of our culture can help us be more clear about the origin, shape, and future of gift giving. The first two chapters press the point that giving is usually either marginalized as an extravagant act that has value for the self alone or reduced to a surreptitious form of exchange in which the self receives as much as the other is given. The second two chapters engage this perplexity with a theological strategy. Indeed, the problem of conceptualizing and practicing an excessive

generosity that is constructively related to the constraints of exchange warrants a careful examination of religious theories of giving. A gift that is not excessive is hardly a gift at all; giving without exchange leaves little room for the return of the gift, a relationship of solidarity and mutuality. Are these elements in giving necessarily mutually exclusive, and, if not, how are they to be ordered? The question is whether giving can embody elements of both excess and exchange at the same time. The more I tried to answer this question, the more I needed theological language about grace and community to illuminate the dynamic of giving. The element of excess assigns the power of giving to the initial act, regardless of consequences, and the perspective of exchange puts the accent of power on the outcome of the act, denying spontaneity and freedom. Only a giving that begins with an original and abundant gift and aims at a community of mutual givers can be both extravagant and reciprocal. Thus, my analysis of theories of giving in the first two chapters already draws on and assumes my theological reconstruction of giving in the last two chapters, just as my theology of giving depends on the framework I establish in the first two chapters. (Indeed, readers more interested in theology can read the last two chapters before the first two.) The result, I hope, is a genuine give-and-take conversation, a revisionary theology that correlates tradition and situation in mutually critical and generous ways.

Against the false alternative between excess and exchange, then, I develop a third option in chapters 3 and 4, a *theo-economics* of giving, in which generosity is funded by an excessive God, who nonetheless promotes reciprocity and mutuality. I use the word *theo-economics* hesitantly in the body of this text because it can signal a premature synthesis of theology and economics. What I offer is not a theological interpretation of economics or an economic reduction of theology but a model of religious agency that brings together excess and exchange in a manner that keeps them separate and yet joined. Theology, I wager, provides a model of antieconomic behavior that goes further than the negations of squandering. The Christian God squanders, but not as an exercise of blind self-affirmation or sovereign freedom; instead, God gives abundantly, in order to create more giving, the goal of which is a mutuality born of excess but directed toward equality and justice. Christianity affirms both excess and mutuality by taking them to the extreme point—located through hope on an eschatological horizon—where they meet, one leading to the other.

The connection of excess and exchange in theology, however, is not so easily accomplished. In fact, I argue in chapter 3 that the same

dualism that governs philosophical conceptions of generosity also regulates many theological doctrines of God. God is usually portrayed either as an excessive giver who does not need exchange, to the point of controlling our own giving, or as giving reciprocally, so that God's giving imitates rather than transforms our own. Can theologians conceptualize a divine excess that nonetheless leaves room for some kind of exchange? The attribution of benevolence to God is one of the most common ways of identifying the divine. God is good. Why? Because God gives. What does God give? Everything, from who we are to what we have and need. But how does God give, and how does that giving relate to our own attempts at generosity? That is, can we give as God gives? Can excess be exchanged? The more I relied on the theological notions of grace and community (church) in order to understand giving, the more I realized that thinking about giving also helps us think better about theology. The category of the gift, properly understood, helps us think more clearly about how God's grace is neither utterly irrelevant to human actions nor tied too closely to them. The theory of giving helps us understand how grace works by creating its own kind of economy, quite different from the economics of exchange that pervades the modern spirit.

The question of the relationship between God's giving and our own has fascinated and troubled philosophers and theologians at least since Plato's *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates' opponent defines *holiness* as the commerce between the divine and the human. Does God give to us in a balanced and proportional manner, rewarding our efforts according to the logic of desert? Does religion merely reproduce the dynamic of exchange? E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) was one of the earliest and most influential anthropological theories tracing the origin of sacrificial rituals to the human attempt to bribe, pay tribute to, and trade with hidden supernatural forces. Religion thus economizes (organizes and makes a profit from) our relationship with the unknown. Religion is embellishment that perpetuates the order of the same (that is, the self) rather than inaugurates something different (the other). Religion is exchange taken to a higher, more fanciful (but still repetitive) level.

Such theories presuppose the dominance of exchange over excess, to the point where religion merely imitates the economics of the everyday. As a Christian theologian, responsive to the intrusive reality of grace, I could not accept these attenuations of God's presence/presents in the world. The alternative is to portray God's grace as pure excess, a unique, abundant, and sovereign initiative unrelated to our response, but I did not want to isolate and compartmentalize God's grace from the

practical realm of material culture, the patterns of appropriation, production, and consumption that circumscribe and define quotidian reality. Hence, throughout this book, I argue that, to make sense and to be relevant, God's giving must be correlated to our own practices of exchange and reciprocity, yet this correlation cannot be strict or exact. For the Christian theologian, there can be neither absolute similarity nor pure dissimilarity between God's giving and our own. If God's giving is *sui generis*, an excess purified of the mutuality of exchange, then God is removed from human concerns and activities, yet a God who gives just as we do, trading this for that, cannot be the source of an abundance that enables us to give extravagantly. Drawing on the trinitarian doctrine of God in chapter 4, I argue that God is both excessive and reciprocal, and I call this theological model of generosity *gifting*. Indeed, the range and breadth of God's giving serve to draw together excess and exchange, joining them in a constructive manner.

The theology of chapter 4 is thus a direct response to the philosophical problems I develop in chapters 1 and 2. Gifting combines excess and exchange without obliterating their differences. My goal is not to retreat from critical discourse in order to arrive at a protective place where the purity of giving can be defended from the stain of self-interest. Sentimentalism aside, all gifts combine, at some level, power and care. After all, our very birth is a gift, symbolized by one's name, which is unsolicited, both bestowed and imposed, a sign of the fact that we are recipients, whether we like it or not, and that every gift comes as both surprise and demand, grace and task. The point is to find a force in giving that is not intrusive alone but compels the gift along as an affirmation of our individuality and freedom. The power of the gift should reside in the process as a whole and not just in its beginning or end. The gifts of God determine who we are by enabling us to give to others. In the trinitarian pattern of giving, the excessive gift endows a mutual exchange, simultaneously making the excessive productive and the reciprocal unpredictable. Thus, Christianity offers the possibility of a gift that is not bound by the dilemma of self and other but rather emerges from and returns to a community of givers, all empowered by an original abundance capable of accelerating the gift even as it is exchanged.