

Jacques Derrida and the condition of (im) possibility of the gift

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Abstract: The present article analyzes critically the concept of gift as well as its conditions of possibility or impossibility. Jacques Derrida pondered the question of the gift under philosophical point of view after analyzing the system of gift exchange made by French Sociologist Marcel Mauss. The gift, by nature, must be gratuitous, but falls into aporia because every time it is acknowledged as such, it returns to the sender. Therefore the conditions of possibility are, at the same time, the conditions of impossibility. The gift is also similar to the concept of time that it does exist but its unreachable and isolated and ends up being nothing.

Keywords: Aporia. Derrida. Gift. Time.

Jacques Derrida e a condição de (im) possibilidade de dom

Resumo: O presente artigo analisa criticamente o conceito de *dom* e as condições de sua possibilidade ou impossibilidade. Jacques Derrida foi o primeiro a ponderar filosoficamente a questão depois de analisar o sistema de trocas que envolve o dom, narrado pelo sociólogo francês Marcel Mauss. O dom, devendo ser por sua natureza gratuito, acaba caindo numa aporia que resiste a toda forma de solução porque todas as vezes em que ele é reconhecido como tal, retorna àquele que o enviou, deixando de ser gratuito e se tornando assim similar a um círculo econômico de troca. Assim as condições de sua possibilidade são, ao mesmo tempo, as condições de sua impossibilidade. O dom ainda se assemelha ao tempo que é mesmo tempo é, mas escapa às mãos do articulador, sendo, no final, nada.

Palavras-chave: Aporia. Derrida. Dom. Tempo.

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Jacques Derrida e la condizione d'(im) possibilità del dono

Riassunto: Il presente articolo analizza criticamente il concetto di *dono* e le condizioni di possibilità oppure l'impossibilità. Jacques Derrida è stato il primo a mettere in luce la questione filosofica dopo aver esaminato il sistema di cambio del dono narrato dal filosofo francese Marcel Mauss. Il dono, che per natura deve essere gratuito, finisce per essere un'aporia che resiste a qualsiasi tipo di soluzione perché qualora sia riconosciuto tale, ritorna immediatamente al donatore in maniera tale che è simile ad un sistema di circolo economico. Dunque le condizioni della sua possibilità sono, allo stesso tempo, le condizioni d'impossibilità. Il dono, somigliando ancora al tempo che in principio esiste ma nello stesso istante sfugge alle nostre mani e alla comprensione dell'io essendo, alla fine, nulla. Ma la questione è: tutto ciò è davvero possibile?

Parole chiavi: Aporia. Derrida. Dono. Tempo.

Unfolding the Query of the Gift

The chief purpose of this essay is to engage in critical endeavor about whether the gift can be regarded as possible or impossible. The gift odyssey began with French sociologist Marcel Mauss when he released his book *The Gift* in 1954 in which he described how ancient tribes in Australia used to thrive in their battle for survival by exchanging gifts with other tribes. Depending on how the exchange goes, a battle was engaged or not, and thus the circle of exchange began. Among the best ways of getting along with others was by sending presents or giving sons and daughters in marriage and, therefore, creating the circumstances in which people had to work together. Every time a tribe received a gift deemed to be good for all, another gift was exchanged and both sides remained satisfied and in peace. Not reciprocating the gift was considered offensive and could result in penalties and wars. A gift demanded another one and another one, and so the circle of exchange is fulfilled.

The problem of the gift achieved a high level of difficulty when French philosopher Jacques Derrida released his book *Given Time, coun-*

terfeit money in which the author asks whether *giving* is really possible. The philosophical problem arrives when Derrida affirms that whenever someone gives something and the object given is acknowledged as such, it inevitably enters in a circle of exchange. The gift given turns out to be a debt to be paid and returned, cancelling the gift that by nature is supposed to be free with no return whatsoever. For the gift to appear, it must not appear as such since the mere acknowledgment puts it into circulation in a way similar to how money is circulated from hand to hand. The gift turns out to be an *aporia* that resists solution. Only a perfect gift, according to Derrida, would escape the circle, but a perfect gift is a future gift that never arrives. Consequently, the gift is impossible.

Derrida is not exactly what we would call atheist. His background is rooted in the Jewish tradition in which the Messiah has not arrived yet. He probably fits better into the kind of thinker that is religious without religion and what he believes in might not match what people probably believe. However, his account about the gift casts shadows over the common way of thinking that God is gift to mankind or Jesus has brought a gift of salvation to all. If the gift is impossible, it's impossible everywhere, anytime.

People have the sense of the meaning of the word “gift” because it is quite usual and common in our social life. From ancient societies to our present ones, the exchange of gifts has been a regular act that affirms the bonds of friendship and demonstrates communal values. By drawing attention to the bonds that unite humanity, the gift brings into focus the fact that no human being can live alone. Since the emergence of the first human group, the best way of avoiding enemies, making arrangements and thriving was to exchange gifts. Therefore, exchanging gifts always has been an excellent method to augment social ties. In this way, our ancestors secured peace between enemies and, ultimately, prompted the shift from a nomadic to a settled and stable existence.

When I refer to the “other” as the “recipient” of gifts, I bring into focus the importance of alterity – someone completely different from me

who I trust and expect to enhance my own life. Marriages, parties and anniversaries show me that the world is not only about me, but about humanity as a whole. We have created rules and laws; we have built a complex society in order to organize our lives.

Apparently we have been establishing bonds to unite family and neighbors since humanity first came into existence, although bonds of friendship might have come later on. This is a sort of reciprocity. Aristotle brought into focus that friendship depends on community for the sake of all, and that we rely on friendship for personal protection and to grow as individual¹: In early societies, people did not have the capacity to trust or establish friendship as we do now.. Instead, they adjusted their relationship to reflect their own necessity. Gifts, however, have always been a part of human interchange. Our ancestors exchanged the gifts they received, naturally, almost instinctively. Reciprocity was part of their lives.

Similarly, moral values have been ubiquitous since the beginning of humanity, and our moral backgrounds conditioned how we responded to specific sets of circumstances. Meanwhile, despite the enormous range of values we have held through history, the gift is ever present, intermingling obligations and liberty. Indeed, when someone receives a gift, somehow he or she appears to be tempted to respond by giving or returning something to the sender, even if the sender doesn't say anything or apparently does not demand anything. Recipients might experience

¹ Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), 207: "... to the extent of their association is the extent of their friendship, as it is the extent to which justice exists between them. And the proverb *what friends have is common property* [Emphasis added] expresses the truth, for friendship depends on community. Now brothers and comrades have all things in common, but the others to whom we have referred have definite things in common – some more things, others fewer, for friendships. And the claims of justice differ too; the duties of parents to children and those of brothers to each other are not the same, nor those of comrades and those fellow citizens, and so, too, with the other kinds of friendship."

shame or be judged as shameful if they do not respond to the gift's senders because in old moral patterns, the lack of reciprocation becomes justification to regard an unresponsive recipient as inferior, especially if there is no intention to return anything. These same moral patterns require one to give back more than he has received (Maus, 1990, p. 65). Usually a gift must be given and must be accepted. This custom has remained unchanged through the generations, and basically the exchange of gifts has been part of people's ordinary life.

The custom of returning a gift with another is far from being a lost ancient social practice. In our modern world, people act similarly in terms of acknowledging the other's gift as such and returning it, somehow. Although civilizations are concerned with their own interest, such as obtaining profit, they could have engaged in war – and often they did – or look for peace to obtain their objectives. This behaviour is far from altruistic; rather, it is a way of ensuring the survival of their traditions and culture. Obviously the exchanging of gifts is an excellent method of bringing together two or more civilizations to the table in order to talk. The practice has been spotted in Australia subgroups that regulate their members' lives using either relatively amorphous and disinterested economic systems or economic rationalism (Mauss, 1990, p. 76). Despite their loose economic systems, these groups were interested in accounting techniques, and so were open to learning more about them. Hence, exchanging logic became a part of their regular lives. It seems elements of aggressive rivalry such as raiding and fighting were absent, but inter-group contracts as well as inter-mingled ceremonies connected to marriage, circumcision and death indicated the existence of more complex relationships between different groups – as did regular exchanges of gifts. Indeed, gifts were probably compulsory and permanent fixtures in special occasions to acknowledge life events such as marriage, childbirth and puberty. These occasions, and the gifts exchanged during them, would tie the entire community in common bonds and preserve them from extinction.

One might feel there is an obligation to give because friendship and love must be expressed somehow, and probably the best way of doing this is by offering a present. Giving carries the obligation to repay the gift received, and the one to whom the gift is given is obliged to receive. It would be rude to deny something given to you as sign of love or altruism². The obligation to give and the obligation to receive may generate a circle of exchange that ties giver and receiver together in such a way that the circle cannot be broken. To refuse to give or to offer, and the refusal of a gift offered may be equivalent to the declaration of war or the termination of any type of relationship.

Although it's a sign of something intangible, the gift must be a material object moved from one hand to another in order to bind people together. Upon arrival, the gift inevitably becomes the object of reciprocity, a circle of exchange that is fundamental and very important to all ancient societies.

The question about the gift becomes more complex when one asks whether or not the giver is forced to offer his gift. According to the general view, a gift should not be demanded, nor should an individual be forced to offer something without his specific agreement. Common sense seems to tell us the giver must be free to give or to refuse to do it. From the very beginning, however, the circle of exchange's behavior undermines this general rule because, as has been pointed out, refusal to reciprocate a gift would result in serious issues that could jeopardize a group's existence and perhaps even an entire generation. In spite of the presence of this moral paradox, at least within the archaic societies to give was something that could not be avoided. The giver could

² Maori ritual of hospitality comprises: an obligatory invitation that should not be refused or solicited; the guest must approach the reception house looking straight ahead; his host should have a meal ready for him straight away and himself partake of it humbly; on leaving, the guest receives a parting gift. Tregear. *The Maori Race*, (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1987) p. 29. Other rites of different groups follow basically the same pattern with some differences.

perhaps refuse to give, but by doing so he would put his group at risk, so consequently he was forced to follow certain patterns of social and psychological endeavor. In turn, the recipient had the obligation to repay the gift received and could not do otherwise. And so both giver and recipient enter the endless circle of exchange that will be the object of inquiry later in this essay.

In this essay I shall pursue further implications the problem of the gift generates, and attempt to answer whether justification can be found within ancient pattern behavior for presenting the gift, or if there is reason to believe that it cannot be given. I will analyze the issue step by step by analyzing the gift possibility.

The Gift and the Present

A gift is a thing given willingly to someone without payment. By nature a gift must be gratuitous, like a voluntary transference of a property to another person, without expecting any type of reward or compensation. Being free is an essential part of the gift. The attitude of the giver must be as if he never would expect something in return. The true spirit of the giver is to act freely without asking anything or assuming that the recipient must repay by giving something back. The spirit here is only the generosity of the giver because he could stay home and offer nothing at all, if he wanted. Indeed, presenting a gift would be a suspicious activity if the giver gives with intent other than generosity. Acting otherwise would transform the gift into a contract, perhaps a bribe or something else. The gift would be undermined.

Whenever the gift is given in spontaneous fashion showing love, affection or another feeling that reveals gratuity, the gift would be given. For the object given to qualify as a gift, therefore, the giver must be free. It would be odd if I offer a gift only in my intention by saying, for instance, “receive my affection.” Where is the gift? Something immaterial that resides in my heart only? The gift must be able to pass from one

to another.³ Consequently, the stain of altruism must not taint the gift inasmuch as every kind of acknowledgment will do so.⁴ If we ask people what they understand about the word “gift,” they will probably define it in terms of gratuitousness. However, probably they will also say that they never expect a gift to be repaid and returned to the giver because “it has been given from my heart.” Yet, if someone forgets my birthday or wedding day, I feel sad and alone because my relatives, perhaps my parents or even my spouse, did not say, “happy birthday.” Similarly, we always expect a word, a smile, a gaze or something else that will fulfill our soul by saying something like “well done,” or “good job”! It seems that by our very nature we expect some acknowledgment. When I give something, it does not seem to be really free, although people probably do not realize it. In any way, a vivid and intense philosophical debate has been brought into focus involving the possibility or impossibility of the gift. We may be wrong about what we think we know about the gift, and the philosophical debate outcome reveals that the definition and conditions of possibility of the gift is really problematic.

Derrida and the Gift’s Illusion

Marcel Mauss’ writing about the gift can be regarded as an account about the way the ancient tribes exchanged – for different reasons – goods, children and rewards. He brought to light the simple and straightforward

³ So a gift seems to have something to do with presence in the present. A gift is made present, it is brought before its intended recipient, it enters into the presence of the one who is to receive. Does this mean that there can be no giving in secret? If I am present to a present do I have to be completely aware of it, or aware of its value as a gift? Robyn Horner, *Rethinking God as a Gift* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 3

⁴ Why does my gift always end up having a purpose, or being a response to someone or something? Why does your gift to me never say anything? Why are gifts always set in the context of other gifts of lesser or greater gifts, of gifts that measure each new gift within an inch of its life? Horner, *Rethinking God*, 5

system in which every gift received had to be repaid. It is easy to comprehend, in Mauss description; there are all sorts of interests when people exchange gifts and therefore, the system is inevitably doomed to remain in an economic circle, even if no money is involved. The gift is given only to repay something or to achieve something that otherwise would be very difficult to obtain. The gift becomes an exchanging value that can be measured and quantified and used for credit, debt, payment, reimbursement, loan or expression of friendship. Mauss points out that the gift entails the notion of credit subject to the laws of economy. It seems that in these primitive societies, the honor can be paid in the gift transactions.

Derrida is aware of Mauss' description of gift. Therefore he gives rise to a new level of criticism concerning the gift and challenges its existence.⁵ In order to grasp the depth of this criticism, we shall proceed little by little showing precisely Derrida's point by putting in evidence the reason why the gift is self-contradictory and semantically is a myth. Derrida criticizes the conception of the gift by asking: "What is gift;" "what is the condition of possibility?;" "does the economic circle work or can it be applied to the gift;" "does gift exist?" Robyn Horner points out that the gift has an internal problem. Every gift given is supposed to be free, a voluntary act without compensation or reward. In order to be a gift, one must give and wait nothing in return.⁶ It has to be given in a certain spirit of generosity or kindness that demonstrates consideration, love or something similar. If I give reluctantly or resentfully my attitude can be regarded as everything but a gift because I might cause an awk-

⁵ Jacques Derrida. *Given time: I Counterfeit money* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 23-78. He uses often this expression in his book.

⁶ This reminds me of the Holy Scriptures that points out that "if a man should give all the substance of his house for love, he shall despise it as nothing" Canticle of Canticles 8:7. There are many things that cannot be thought of only within the narrow economical circle. If I could give all my possessions and achievements in order to cure a cancer, for instance, I would do it. Certainly here I must accept that economic thought does not work with the gift.

ward situation and my gift becomes a burden. Such behavior undermines the very essence of the gift in such a way that it is no longer a gift. If my intention is to give, I have to be aware of the meaning of the gift and be prepared to expect nothing in return. In other words, one has to give unconditionally. The recipient must act likewise. It could be really strange if the recipient finds himself obliged to return the gift received and therefore, repay something that is supposed to be given by generosity only. The gift has to be celebratory, sign of affection and given solely to please and delight the recipient. Horner writes⁷:

Of what, then, does the gift consist? It would seem that the gift is the object that passes from one to another. Or does the true gift consist in the givenness? Does the gift object serve only as a conduit for a certain excess: an excess of generous intention on the part of the one who gives, and a recognition and acceptance of that excess on the part of the one who receives? [...] it is spontaneous, affective and celebratory rather than premeditated, cognitive and calculated to achieve certain ends.

It seems, therefore, for now, that there are four essential conditions that define a gift:

- Freedom;
- No return;
- Deliverance; and
- Presence.

By taking the freedom away the gift loses the reason of its existence and becomes an obligation or sign of something else. If I want to marry someone, I must attain her or his love and gain permission to unite. The kidnapper might be able to force someone to stay in his house and do what-

⁷ Horner, *Rethinking God*, 2

ever he wants. He might force his victim to submit to his will and could even act violently or perform rape, but he will never be able to force the victim to love him because such a feeling is free and is attained, not forced.

That a gift cannot be returned or reciprocated is a feature intertwined with the freedom in which it is given. Because the gift is something freely given, if I attempt to repay it, my effort transforms the gesture of giving into an economic exchange and consequently annuls the “gift” identity of the object of the exchange. The very essence of the gift is motivated by something beyond economic language and never can be returned.

The gift must be deliverable and it cannot be something present only in my intention or in my words. It has to be *something*. It cannot be only words or promises or products of speeches that might never come true. In addition, it cannot be only in my dreams. Although what is given is a sign of something immaterial, the present itself must be deliverable.

Derrida asks whether or not the gift is within the so called *economy circle* in which its value can be measured following the idea of exchange, merchandise, amortization of expenditure a circulation and return. He writes:

Now the gift, *if there is any*, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without this relation to economy, even to the money economy. But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? That which, in suspending economy calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange? That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return? If there is a gift, the given of the gift (that which one gives, that which is given, the gift is given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving. It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form or return to the point of departure⁸.

⁸ Jacques Derrida. *Given Time: Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 7

Is the gift here thought as something that starts with the logic of circulation or, rather, surpasses it? The account of the Derrida's gift has serious implications that threaten the very existence of gift itself. The existence of the circle will encircle us somehow. Where is the exit? Why should I desire a gift if it has no exit at all and therefore, it seems no longer part of time? Gift and non-gift go together and yet both cannot exist together. There is something very strange and paradoxical in the way we talk about the exchanging of the gift⁹. It seems *madness*¹⁰ when you think that gift is no longer thinkable and the bond between giver and given, disappears. Kierkegaard's approach to this issue is to propose there is something that transcends completely our rationality and exists outside of what can be explainable. Our mind cannot grasp and understand what is set outside of the reason. Kierkegaard explains the paradox in context of Socrates, and brings into focus the paradox of Jesus being at the same time human and divine. Derrida, by way of contrast, as the quotation above exemplifies, considers the gift as an *aporia* – a problem that resists solution, offers no way out and withholds hope. At the very moment you think of the gift as an object – or as an action or gesture that is supposed to receive no return, the gift returns itself, cancelling it. The very structure of the gift is aporetic. Even in the event that the recipient does not send anything back, the gift returns anyway. An acknowledgment, a word of thanks, is enough to cancel the gift completely. Even

⁹ Derrida quotes here Kierkegaard when he writes: “*The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think. This passion is at bottom present in all thinking, even in the thinking of the individual, in so far as in thinking he participates in something transcending himself. But habit dulls our sensibilities, and prevent us from perceiving it*” (Johannes Climacus, *Philosophical Fragments*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 46:

¹⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Given time: Counterfeit money*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press 2004), 7. Derrida talks about *madness* of the gift precisely because it does not follow any logic rules and contradicts itself. When one thinks that there is a gift, at the same time, it disappears and escapes our common way of thinking and escapes the common sense. It is a paradoxical instant.

if one gives a gift to an enemy, or the recipient hates the present and he curses you because you gave him something, the gift still returns to you. In fact, you will think that you did something good, you performed an act of bravery and courage and you praise the good man you are. This is precisely the return. In addition, in the very moment in which the gift is identified, it gets annulled. There is no way out. *The gift is impossible and disappears.*

Economic rules appear to survive and are utilized often in financial markets such as Wall Street. In addition, markets worldwide are fed by the logic of money and ruled by it. Therefore, the gift simply does not exist and it does not really follow any external rule. One may suppose knowledge of the meaning of our common language pertaining to the gift, but we do not. We take for granted the meaning of words such “to give,” “gift,” “donor,” “donee,” but we just cannot really know.

The gift is never given and is always annulled in the economy circle and in the realm of being calculated as subject. Obviously the gift cannot take place between exchangeable objects, things and symbols (Derrida, 1991, p. 24). The whole system of exchanging sets aside any possibility of existence of the gift, and therefore what one receives as a gift is not a gift at all and so must be something else. *The condition of possibility of the gift signifies precisely the condition of its impossibility.* Indeed, as has been brought to light, the condition of the gift is gratuity and must be given only by generosity. In addition, it must not return to the giver. However, those conditions cannot be fulfilled and become the condition of impossibility.

If the gift is annulled in the economy odyssey of the circle as soon as it appears as gift or as soon as it signifies *itself* as a gift, there is no longer any “logic of the gift,” and one may safely say that a consistent discourse on the gift becomes impossible. It misses its object and always speaks, finally, of something else. One could go so far as to say that a work as monumental as Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* speaks of everything but the gift: It deals with economy, exchange,

contract, it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift and counter-gift – in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift and the annulment of the gift¹¹.

Mauss might miss the main problem of invoking the exchange object as a gift, nevertheless, he does bring into focus the idea of the circle and recognizes the impossibility of finding the way out. He also indicates the problem of the language in dealing with the exchanged present as gift. How, he asks, can one be sure that, in the circulation of the gift, it can be identified from one culture to another as a gift? Every time we talk about the gift, we cannot escape the following paradox:

1. “If ... then”
2. If the gift appears or signifies itself
3. If it exists or if it is presented as *gift*
4. As what it is, then it is not, it annuls itself

The latter propositions are normal ones and can be regarded as such without any problem. However, if we take the propositions “2” and “4”, or “3” and “4”, we shall realize that one contradicts the other or, in other words, the combination of statements and ideas are opposed to one another. But the contradiction still does not show completely what the gift really is because somehow one might search for a solution and find it. Derrida, on the other hand, asserts that the gift manifests a paradox that resists finding solution in the same way that starting point of the circle always eludes us. The gift is not; it does not exist; it is a nightmare, a burden, a false idea and logically invalid. “The truth of the gift is equivalent to the non-gift or to the non-truth of the gift” (Derrida, 1991, p. 27). In other words, the very structure and possibility of the gift “define or produce the annulment, the annihilation, the destruction of the

¹¹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 24

gift. A gift cannot be what it was except on the condition of not being what it was” (Derrida, 1991, p. 29). When it is exposed to the light of “givenness,” the gift reveals its endless chain of debt and gratitude and congratulation and undoes itself. It encounters no ground to exist because the gift is only a gift without gifting. In fact, every time one receives a gift, immediately the recipient becomes a debtor, and this very moment becomes the reason of cancelling it as a gift.

Referring to the gift, Derrida uses two words: *le cadeau* and *le don*. The first expression could be translated as *the present* while the second one could be translated as *the gift*. Although in French these two words are different, they are closely connected. *Le cadeau* seems to bring to mind something that is given effectively as *present*. *Le don* is the impossible gift that I am unable to fully master. As a matter of fact, this is the radical otherness – the impossible – that goes beyond my experience and makes me completely impotent. The aporetic structure of the gift highlights that *le cadeau* seems to be possible while a material present is given to the recipient. However, this causes the recipient the obligation to immediately return the gift as well as the inescapability of the exchange circle.

Derrida affirms that *le don* without *le cadeau* is madness and similar to the activity of looking for noon at two o’clock.¹² In the same fashion,

¹² Derrida, *Given Time*, 34: “To look for noon at two o’clock is to torment one’s mind trying to find that which, by definition, cannot be found where one is looking for it and especially not at the moment one is looking for it. At no *given moment*, at no *desire moment* can one reasonably hope to find, outside any relativity, noon at two o’clock. This contradiction is the logical and chronological form of the *impossible* simultaneity of two times, of two events separated in time and which therefore cannot be *given* at the same time. To look for the impossible is that form of madness in which we seem to have enclosed ourselves up to now. It is true that looking for “noon” is not just any madness and it is not looking for just any moment; perhaps it is to dream, at whatever time and always too late (at two o’clock it’s already too late), of an origin without shadow, without dialectical negativity...”

although gift and present is not exactly the same thing, they remain attached and impossible. They follow the same pattern of impossibility and are infected with the same virus of contradiction.

In brief, if *le don* brings into focus what is completely beyond my capacity to master it, then we are before something that, despite of my efforts, I cannot grasp at all. There is another thing that we cannot master: The concept of justice. On the one hand, justice describes a passion for something that is not here or is not realized yet. On the other hand, it is something quasi-transcendental that instills in us an expectation that can probably never be realized. The call for justice is of an impossible quasi-messianic nature because it brings about the inquietude of something we desire but will never achieve. Laws are an attempt to fulfill our expectation because they are conditions in which we can see some sparks of justice, but they are not the justice itself. We may revise the laws or change them, but the justice is beyond our capacity to change. It seems to me that the gift is somehow similar to the concept of justice inasmuch as we maintain the illusion of their existence yet both are impossible to achieve. The gift cancels itself. It eludes, baffles and fools me. Justice creates in me the false expectation of its achievability.

Derrida seems to draw from the distinction made by Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigation*, between *intention* (meaning, signification) and *fulfillment* (givenness) according to which the ego *intends* or *means* an object which can only in varying degrees be *fulfilled* or *given* to intuition. Intuition will be fulfilled under the condition of having something to be given since I can never have an empty mind. Intention to give brings about the necessity of something in which it will be confirmed and actualized (Husserl, 2007, p. 188). Both intuition and givenness are necessary to attain the essence of a given object and, therefore, to bring about intentionality. Experience is everything that can be found in the stream of our normal life or everything that takes place (Horner, 2001, p. 46. In this regard experience becomes equivalent to intentionality following the dynamism of the consciousness. Derrida, however, points out that this very structure does not apply for the

gift. In fact, the process of givenness causes the annulment of the gift itself.

The latter definition defies the common sense and it seems to be madness and foolishness. It is impossible because there is no gift that does not have to untie itself from obligation, from debt, contract, exchange, and thus, “and thus, there is nothing that must be separated from its cultural, social, economic and political bindings. The essence, *quidditas*, of the gift has no sense at all, and that is the reason why we should call it non-gift. When you give something, the recipient does not receive a gift because it returns to the sender as soon as it is acknowledged.

Probably inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, according to whom the consciousness is the *breath* of what is given, Derrida pushes further the problem of conscious. Levinas is keen to pursue the other as a truly other to whom I owe something (Levinas, 2004). Derrida agrees that the gift only occurs in the wholly other, even if the other would not recognize it as gift. The other, however, remains other. Consciousness remains important but it is not an essential condition for initiating the gift's return. I cannot be a gift to myself but, rather, it is necessary another one in which the exchange takes place. This is precisely the paradox of the gift because, as it has been pointed out, the very condition of possibility is the condition of impossibility.

The gift also remains within the domain of language. Human beings have built a complex symbolic system in which they communicate through codes, signs and written papers. A sound we make can undertake different meanings depending on the context in which it is made. Facial gestures such as smiles, hand or body gestures and nature as a whole are employed to codify a message so that the other person would be able to understand it. In the '60s the cold war is an example of how information was the key to overcome the other. If I want you to understand me, I have to make myself understood and a misinterpretation of message could lead to disastrous consequences. The gift must be semantically correct and understood as such by both the sender and the recipient. The language must be clear. If the language is not clear the gift does not exist

because the message was not interpreted as such. If the message is right and sender and recipient understand it perfectly, then the gift does not exist either because, as it has been pointed out, it cancels itself.

The Gift and Time

The gift also relates to time and seems to have a close connection. The query comes when Derrida highlights that “where there is a gift, there is time” (Derrida, 1991, p. 41). The gift gives, demands and takes time. On the one hand, time destroys the gift but on the other hand, time is the only true gift. Indeed, says Derrida, the time is the gift of nothing and this is fundamentally the gift of time. Derrida seems to know Augustine’s doctrine of time according to which the only time that exists is the present. However, the past is the time that no longer exists and the future does not exist yet, but every time someone thinks in the past, he brings the past to the present. Accordingly, when one thinks of something in the future, the future becomes present. Therefore the past and the future exist only in the present. The relationship between past, present and future is very interactive since the condition of *existence* of the past and the future is the present.

However, Augustine himself recognizes that it is a tough task to reflect about time since it escapes our minds in the moment we try to grasp it. The ontological import of this line of reflection is that in the end the only gift is the radical non-gift of time, the present moment, that is, nothing at all but the nihilating passage of time from future to past, the dissolution of being in its manifestation of temporality: the gift is the effect of nothing, the pure giving of nothing (the present) to no one, whose delay is endlessly deferred toward that difference – that reciprocation of the gift – that can never be given, never owned, never desired. The gift is no gift: the present that is not (a) present.

However Derrida’s gift account becomes dramatic when he asserts its aporetic structure to be similar to the time itself. Somehow Augustine

acknowledges that we can have experience of time when we call to mind what had happened in the past or in the future. The aporetic structure paralyses any attempt to understand it as something linear. In this case, Derrida affirms that neither the gift nor time exist as such, then the gift that *there can be (qu'il peut y a avoir)*, cannot in any case *give time* (Derrida, 1991, p. 29). In fact one has to acknowledge that no one is able to give time because the time is nothing and it does not properly belong to anyone. The common usage of the language may testify that one can say: "I will give you ten minutes to perform this action." However, that person does not intend to own the time as such, but rather a measured element by which one has some time to perform an action that was determined for him to do.

Time gives us an illusion of having the power to master it, but all we can do is desire it, intend it and encounter it. We will never experience it in its present existence or in our common life as phenomenon (Derrida, 1991, p. 29). Neither the gift nor the time can be directly measured or achieved. It is a "relation without relation to the impossible" (Derrida, 1991, p. 29). Therefore gift and time both appear to elude and fool he who desires to capture or comprehend it. Both are powerless by their very definitions and are no more than "transcendental illusion." Derrida calls to mind the distinction made by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, of phenomenon and *noumenon* as well as his transcendental critique (Kant, 2006, p. 191). Why should we have rational reason to believe that the noumenon exists?

Still, one must render an account that people want to pursue the task of knowing the gift and the time. There is a sort of strength that pushes us toward the simulacrum called gift. Its emptiness goads us like an arrow, motivating us to desire understanding. Yet the journey towards understanding becomes an endless tunnel that fails to deliver any access to our destination.

Derrida asserts that every gift acknowledged as such returns and is cancelled when we follow the pattern of its condition of possibilities.

Therefore, if God is a gift to humankind, then the gift returns to God, the giver, and the gift is cancelled since, according to Derrida, the gifts enter in an economic exchange and there is no way out. Let me push the explanation a bit further. Considering that God as gift is impossible to us, we have to discuss what exactly this might mean to us. Probably, in the practical point of view, it would not have any impact at all. In fact, the creation would not be annihilated or annulled, historic Jesus would continue to be as real as any other existence, the world would continue to be what it is, and the life would be exactly the same. Nothing would really change. In short, denying that God is a gift would not change anything. Things may change, though, from a theoretical point of view.

Derrida claims that there is no exception. If a gift is acknowledged as such, it is cancelled and returns to the giver. Being impossible, the gift loses its path. This point of view, however, has no impact considering the practical point of view. Gifts are given and the recipient, receive them. Theoretical point of view, however, gifts acknowledged as such, are cancelled. Derrida here acts in accordance with his Jewish background that expects a Messiah that never comes. The Messiah belongs to the future and so is the gift. A perfect gift is the one to come, is the future whereas the gift given remains a burden and will never really accomplish its final goal.

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