THE GLOBAL EXPERIENCE OF GIFT, AND SOME PHILOSOPHY

Robert E. Doud

NEW PARENTS CANNOT SPEAK of the precious new life in their charge for very long before they use the word *gift* to describe it. Christians cannot speak at length about their faith without calling it a *gift.* The gift of life and the gift of faith are so precious that they expand exponentially the capacity for gratitude of which our hearts are capable. I like to point out that the word *gift* has in it another little word, the word *if. If* you have the gift of faith, then you will perceive the world and your place in it as gifts. Conversely, if you perceive your life and the world as great and undeserved gifts, then you are on your way to making an act of faith. Everything in the world, and in life, or—as philosophers might say—*being* itself,[1] is a gift and a blessing. Life is a constant flow of fresh experiences and challenges that keep surprising you as you live it.

My aim here is to make the experiences or phenomena of receiving and of exchanging gifts into paradigms for understanding the meaning of life, the universe and our orientation to action in the world. I take the basic affective states of surprise and gratitude as the residual and underlying tones of feeling in, beneath or behind all existence. Unlike some other gifts that abound everywhere, gratitude is not dispensed liberally and automatically. We have to find our way to gratitude, cherish it and nurture it. Gratitude must be maintained and it can be increased by prayer and contemplation.

To begin with, I am thankful because life to me has been a gift, and it has been filled with a variety of other gifts. People, relationships,

[1] See William Richardson, *Heidegger: From Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 599. Explaining the philosopher Martin Heidegger, Richardson writes: 'In hailing the thinker into Being, Being imparts itself to him as gift, and this gift is what constitutes itself as the essence of the thinker ….'

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places, opportunities, marriage, health, home, education, employment—all of these I can appreciate in the modality of gift. Religiously speaking, faith itself, God, Church, the church's ministers and teachers, sacraments, religious experiences—all of these are to be received with a global affection of gratitude. Even beyond all of these gifts is another gift, the gift of finding myself placed in reciprocal relationships with other people, and even with God! Appreciating the gifts given to others that work to my benefit as well, I cherish my own gifts, and try to share them in ways that will benefit others.

The basis of religious experience lies in my perception of the universe as gift. It is all there for me, provided in advance for my enhancement. I look out into the universe and experience what I see as the result of intelligent design and beneficent providence. I do this to the depth and extent that I enjoy my faith that all will be well, even as I see suffering, pain and setbacks of all kinds, even in the lives of those I love.

Working with the notion of gift, we might say that we experience ourselves, with our unique tendencies and talents, as contributors to society and to the world. We create a network of relationships and achievements as we decide things, act freely and live responsibly. After our loving Lord, we are, each of us, our own best benefactor. We are gifts to ourselves and to others. Life is fundamentally rich with meaning and value, and we enhance these qualities for ourselves and for others. The world is a gift, a vast field of opportunities for us. We take the things of nature and translate them into objects of value within culture. Our work and our play are cultural expressions that are meant both to exploit and to enhance nature, to enrich others, to give new meaning to natural things and to bring them to completion.

We are gifts to ourselves and to others

In the school of philosophy that is called *phenomenology*,[2] the focus is on describing the basic contact between mind and world. Mind or consciousness is most fundamentally related to the world by perception. In perception there is initiative on both sides, that is, the mind shapes the world as it comes to know it, while the world offers data about itself to the mind. Perception includes sensation, but it also both seeks

[2] Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 2: 'Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the way things present themselves to us in and through such experience.' In this article, we take all that we experience, ourselves as knowers, and experience itself, to be gifts.

and imposes meaning on the things it knows through the senses. The human heart is a hunger for meaning and value, as it seeks for both of these and half-creates them in the process. The human being is also, most fundamentally, both an individual making its way in the world and a member of a community that is simultaneously local and global.

The philosopher David Hume,[3] who was not a phenomenologist, was right when he said that the sentiment of benevolence was the root of human affection and appetition. We humans are sharing animals, benevolent animals, just as we are also social animals and ethical animals. We are sentimental and benevolent animals before we are rational and political ones. If our basic attitude towards life is to live as one receiving many gifts, then our basic response to life is to act as gift-givers, persons sharing wealth and experiences with others. My basic power is my power to please others, and I am further empowered by them as they express appreciation for what I give. This is reciprocal. I also empower others by receiving gifts from them, and affirming them as giving persons.

Do ut des

Human relationships function successfully on the basis of enlightened self-interest. The world is designed in such a way that it is in our interest to be generous and thoughtful towards others. This will prompt them to be generous and considerate towards us. If someone has an influence upon my judgments, it is likely that I also have influence upon his or her judgments. Influence tends to be a mutual or reciprocal operation. When we use common expressions such as *tit for tat* and *quid pro quo*, these expressions show an understanding based on a general appreciation of how reciprocation works among people. There is some long-term benefit for me in the good things I do for you. It may be considered crude or improper to be too explicit about expectations of reciprocation, but they are always subliminally in place. As for Christians, we are gaining eternity in bliss by the way we treat the least of our brothers and sisters.[4]

[3] See W. T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, volume 3, *Hobbes to Hume* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 345. Explaining Hume, Jones writes: 'Not only is it an empirical fact that all men experience (at least to some extent) the sentiment of benevolence. It is also an empirical fact that this sentiment underlies our moral judgments.'

[4] For a very different view of gift-giving and reciprocation, see John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 69–73.

Marcus Aurelius makes a sacrifice in gratitude for victory

It is held in common by many religions that if the divine reality can read our hearts, minds and intentions, it will always know the good we do, and will reward us for it. Aware of this ourselves, it is nearly impossible for us to be purely altruistic and unconcerned with self as we return our thanks to God, or to the gods in polytheistic religions. Our human nature is created to be reciprocal. We are designed to be both receivers and givers.

Religion in Essence and Manifestation, written by Gerardus van der Leeuw, is a basic work in the study of phenomenology of religion. In this work, an important aspect of the phenomenon of sacrifice is the ancient Roman (and Greek) idea of *do ut des,* or the flow of the gifts.[5] Literally, *do ut des* means: *I give so that you will give*. The gods provide sustaining gifts for humans, and humans offer prayer, worship and sacrifices back to the gods. Roman and Greek religion involved a circular and reciprocal flow, maintained by the highly structured priesthoods that served in the various temples. The piety of the Roman people was also important

[5] Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation: A Study in Phenomenology,* volume 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 350–354. See also Jon D. Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 27.

and structured in this way. This is a basis for understanding all religious experience and response, and some derivative of it is a basis of mature and healthy personality in a modern secular context as well.

The Romans knew that their gods would not be outdone by their devotees in matters of generosity. We too know that no one earns God's grace or providence but, in so far as it is possible, we try to be worthy of divine benefits. These considerations go to the essence of religion and are indispensable to ethics and good politics. For us, such ready reciprocity and responsive gratitude are hallmarks of spiritual and emotional maturity. For the Romans, as for us, merely or narrowly to be concerned about oneself violates both piety and ethics. To the Romans, religion served as the basis of stable society, and of a politics based on a vision of the common good of all citizens.

The Phenomenology of Religion

The Latin word *religio* refers to the linking up or connecting of people with the gods. The idea of the reciprocal flow of gifts can explain this basic religious connection. A descriptive phenomenology of religious practices, together with an understanding of the attitudes behind the many activities and rituals of different religions, is the best way to define religion through its manifestations. Nevertheless, a selection must be made as to which practices are the most focal and fundamental. I shall treat the Roman approach, as presented by van der Leeuw, as most typical of religion in general: the patterns and practices among the many world religions can at length be reconciled to and illuminated by the Roman example and model.

Religion, in this perspective, is the human attempt to set up a cycle of exchange, whereby our deities continue to supply us with life and all the gifts and benefits we need to sustain us, and we continue steadily to return our prayers and rituals of praise, gratitude and adoration. The function of religion is to organize into a sustainable pattern the rituals and institutions that serve to protect and sustain human communities and individuals. In the ancient world, it was a matter of national interest to worship the gods of the nation, and to avoid displeasing these gods in any way. Humans make offerings to the gods, so that they will continue the flow of benefits that we need, including protection from our enemies.

Religious obligation arises out of a sense of dependence on the gods and out of a sense of gratitude for what they give us. In order not to

take these gifts for granted, but to be worthy of them, we return grateful acknowledgement to the gods, along with our supplications for further benefaction. Roman religion involved the maintenance of temples, rituals and priesthoods dedicated to the service of the gods. The state had definite interests in the maintenance of these institutions. For them, the flow of gifts from the gods must not be interrupted; neither should the flow of gifts from people to the gods be interrupted. Maintaining the gods' favour was crucial. Sacrilege was tantamount to treason.

Israel, as is well known, enjoyed a covenant relationship with the one God, Yahweh. The covenant is another two-sided or reciprocal relationship. God promised gifts to, and offered a sustaining relationship with, God's people. On their part, the people reciprocated with vows of faithfulness to their God, involving also compassion and social justice in the way they treated one another. God initiated this giving relationship with generous preference for God's people, while the people struggled towards fidelity through many betrayals. Punishment and forgiveness came to define God's attitude towards Israel. Failures in loyalty and repeated conversions came to typify Israel's response. Thus, ancient Hebrew religion, later Judaism, and Christianity are all examples that ratified the Roman model of reciprocal care in the phenomenology of religion.

The Philosophy of Religion

I would not know how to do a philosophy that was not a philosophy of religion. I read even Nietzsche as a wounded and alienated philosopher of religion. Nietzsche is wrongly regarded by some as having been a dismal pessimist. Actually, he developed his odd idea of the *eternal recurrence of the same*[6] as a doctrine that would evoke an affirmative response to all of life, accepting it as it is, with all that life dishes out in the way of fortune and misfortune. Nietzsche struggles to understand life without the categories that would allow him to succeed. He lacks maturity, as well as accurate ideas of gratitude,[7] gift-consciousness and human benevolence. Nietzsche's idea of eagle courage is to get through life without all of these things, as if they were tokens of weakness. The attitude of Nietzsche in his writing is very often isolated, pathetic and sociopathic.

[6] Simon Blackburn, 'Nietzsche, Friedrich', *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 262. Blackburn writes: 'Nietzsche's free spirits recognize themselves by their joyful attitude to eternal return.'

[7] See Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, translated by Shelley Frisch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 187. Safranski quotes Nietzsche as saying: 'gratitude is a mild form of revenge', 187.

This does not mean that he is not full of insight into the modern mind, philosophy and the challenges facing religion. Reading Nietzsche makes me appreciate more the mature Christian vision of reality as a flow of gifts to be met with gratitude and responded to with generosity.

The philosophy of religion and the phenomenology of religion should begin with the realisation that being[8] in its totality is a gift. The world, life itself, being and our own lives are gifts, either bestowed randomly by the universe or particularly by a generous, creating God. We cannot understand religion as a possibility and as a real phenomenon until we learn to view the cosmos and our conscious involvement in it as gifts. Gratitude is then our fundamental response to being. Bad things can happen in this world, but that is only because, by comparison, the world and so many things about it are obviously good. There would be no religion if people did not believe that life is good, that it comes undeservedly as a gift, and that a provident entity needs to be thanked for this gift. Thus, we have religion in essence and in its many manifestations.

In a homily I heard recently, the preacher read this quotation from St Ignatius Loyola:

> … of all imaginable evils and sins, one that most merits the loathing of our Creator and Lord and of every creature capable of his divine and everlasting glory is the sin of ingratitude, being as it is the refusal to acknowledge the goods, graces and gifts that we have received, and so the cause, principle and source of every evil and sin … on the other hand, acknowledgement and gratitude for goods and gifts received is so highly loved and esteemed both in heaven and on earth.[9]

Ingratitude, then, is the height of immaturity. It is due to narrowness of perspective and blind selfishness. It is closely akin to the pride that is often cited as the cause or basis of all sin and evil.

Conversely, the healthiest understanding of life today is the circle of receiving and giving in response to the benevolent power of life itself.

[8] Karl Rahner, 'Being', *Theological Dictionary*, translated by Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 53. 'We call "a being", or entity, any conceivable object of knowledge, anything that is not nothing …. To this extent 'being' may be taken to mean that which makes "a being" of this something which is not nothing.'

[9] Ignatius to Simão Rodrigues, 18 March 1542, in *Ignatius of Loyola: Letters and Instructions*, edited and translated by Martin E. Palmer, John W. Padberg and John L. McCarthy (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 72.

Beneficence met with gratitude, personal talent exercised with generosity, worshipful reciprocity—these are the phenomenological attitudes that structure healthy and mature existence. In all of our pursuits, we need to touch the basis of human self-experience and response to the world. This basis involves gift-consciousness and gratitude as fundamental ways of being in the world.

Maturity and Commitment as a Spiritual Values

Maturity is, or should be, an important word in both philosophy and psychology. The mature mind and personality are grateful, forgiving and generous. Our discussions about happiness, pleasure, power and authenticity eventually become discussions about friendship, sharing, sacrifice and helping others. I would add up all these spiritual qualities, and I would call the sum of them all by the name *maturity*. As we grow in maturity, we recognise that we stand in reciprocal relationships with many people: family, friends, colleagues, fellow Christians and persons quite unlike ourselves as well.

Maturity is the quality of people who are thoroughly *personalised*, that is, they are well *integrated* in their own personalities and into the world around them. By *personalised*, I mean that they have appropriated and taken possession of the complex unity of talents, challenges, accomplishments, setbacks, failures and relationships that constitutes each of us. And, if not a *smugness*, there is often a certain *snugness* that mature people experience as they nestle into a pattern of living that both serves others and suits themselves. The life of a mature person is a life of freely sustained commitment to worthwhile values.

A mature or well-integrated person knows how to give a gift with modesty and generosity, and how to receive a gift with humility and gratitude. When I write about commitment, I refer to it in the context of receiving with appreciation and giving with generosity. Our reciprocal existence is structured into a pattern of commitments that define us as givers and receivers. Our commitments are responses to the gift-quality of life. The gifts one has, and is able to see and appreciate in others, give the person his or her uniqueness; you shape your life around your own gifts and how you are to share them with others. Others may shape their lives around you, at least in part, and part of your commitment is to empower them so they can realise their own commitments. You are a gift and a set of talents and resources for them; and they are gifts or sets of the same for you.

Different cultures and religions have expressed this vision of a blessed circle of reciprocity in various ways. The secular and scientific worldviews are based on abstractions from the realms of meaning and value that are important to humans as individuals and as members of societies. By contrast to the scientific, the phenomenological worldview that is favourable to religion is one that is open to transcendence and has a sense of our own limitation of scope and vision. The trouble with an entirely scientific or empirical view is that it abstracts itself from the more-than-empirical frame of reference within which it is situated. The narrowly scientific or empirical view is not open to the possibility that there is more in the world than what it can observe, describe and verify. Philosophy, while it appreciates the objectivity of scientific method, must develop a wider and more extended vision of reality.

Beauty, Gifts, God and Wonder

Philosophy begins in wonder, and it ends in wonder as well. Philosophy should wonder about what lies beyond its own ability to grasp, understand and analyze. Wonder and speculation about beauty and about where beauty comes from are gifts in themselves. How wonderful it is to wonder about beautiful things and about beauty itself, about life and about each living thing! Can there be beauty without wonder, or wonder without beauty? Global acceptance of all that is and of all that we can wonder about is more important than the analytical knowledge by which we bring things down to our own size mentally and intellectually, so that we can comprehend and control them.

Epiphany, *by Jaume Huguet*

Christians can wonder at their own ability to make God happy. Does God see beauty in us, even as the fools and sinners that we often are? I think God

does. Can we surprise God? Can we give God a gift that God did not expect? I think we can. God created us free so that we can respond to God freely. God gives us gifts often as an anonymous benefactor. God does not insist on recognition. Indeed, it often seems that God does not want recognition. Yet, God appreciates it when we appreciate God as the giver of all good gifts. When we call God *Father* or *Mother*, we appreciate God as the author of all life, including our very own life, and as the giver of all good gifts. Worship is a form of gratitude.

What should we say about the quality there is within gifts that makes them gifts? The gift-quality of something is not an ingredient in it that can be put on a list with the other material entities that make it to be whatever it is. Yet, when someone gives me a gift, the gift-quality in it is usually worth more to me than any of the mere ingredients that make the thing whatever it is. Neither do I observe God directly or empirically in this universe. I have to be able to pick up subtle hints that this giver stands behind the array of gifts deployed in front of me. It is important to me and to God that I look behind, that I be able to look behind, things to see that they are not merely things—they are gifts.

Once I see things as gifts, they come alive with beauty. The mask of anonymity is then stripped off the face of God, and I recognise the divine in the beauty shining through the objects given to me. The glory of God, an aspect that God has in the Old Testament, is God's radiant appearance, yet it often becomes present only as through a cloud. This is so because, as the Bible says, if we were to look directly upon the face of God with our human eyes, we would die. We do not have the capacity to endure beauty when it presents itself to us at full strength. Sometimes, it is the cloud protecting us from looking directly at God that is called God's glory. Beauty or glory is primarily the shining radiance itself.

Allowing ourselves to wonder and to get lost in the joy of wondering is to give something back to God. It is the stuff of prayer. Wonder is generous, and wonder is grateful in so far as wonder gives back to God and to the universe the recognition that all that is of great value to us is unearned, undeserved, gratuitous and accepted as much-appreciated gifts. For the Christian, wonder takes place in the context of prayer, or, if it seems to begin somewhere else, it soon takes on the blessed rapture and receptivity of prayer. The scientist can learn to

wonder at life and at its natural processes, just as the parent wonders at the beauty of his or her newborn. Perhaps God cherishes each of us as a priceless gift, just as if we were a newborn infant in God's parental arms.

Robert E. Doud is emeritus professor of philosophy and religious studies at Pasadena City College in California. He has a particular interest in bringing together philosophy and poetry, using poetry as material offering insight into philosophy and using philosophy as a tool in the interpretation of poetry. His articles have appeared in *Process Studies*, *Review for Religious*, *The Journal of Religion*, *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Philosophy Today*, *The Thomist*, *Religion and Literature*, *Horizons*, *Soundings* and *Existentia*.