

‘I KNOW THE GIFT CAN ONLY BE RETURNED’

Giving and Giving Back in the *Contemplatio*

Robert R. Marsh

Love consists in a mutual communication between the two persons. That is, the one who loves gives and communicates to the beloved what he or she has ... and the beloved in return does the same to the lover Each shares with the other. (Exx 231)

IGNATIUS BRINGS THE Spiritual Exercises to an end with a contemplative exercise on God’s love and a prayer to be caught up by that love acting in the world.¹ But for an exercise about love it spends a lot of time focused on *gift*. Why, I wonder, out of all the aspects of love and loving he could have chosen, does Ignatius choose gift and gratitude as the focus of the *Contemplatio*, an exercise to help us receive the grace of loving the way God loves?

The *Contemplatio* is saturated with the language of gift: see *what* you have been given, see *how* it has been given, see the *giver*—see all that, feel it, and gratitude will rise in you, and you will respond by giving back all you have to the one who has given to you. There is the heart of it. Understand gift, Ignatius seems to imply, and you understand love.

But do I understand gift? How *do* I see my experience, my life, my creation and redemption, my blessing and talents, my comedy and tragedy—how do I get to see all that as gift? Because I could always take it all for granted. I do tend to take it all for granted.

I can ignore the gift in so many different ways. I can, for example, fail to see my life as *given* in any significant way. Take the gift of existence: here I am; I didn’t ask to be; I might from time to time like it or hate it but here I am nevertheless. It is a brute fact—what in science would be

¹ Exx 230–237. At least current practice tends to place the *Contemplatio* at the end of the experience: for a discussion of other interpretations, see Michael Buckley, ‘The Contemplation to Attain Love’, *The Way Supplement*, 24 (Spring 1975), 92–104.

called a *given*. There is nothing magical about it. It happened naturally. Why should I see it as *gift*? Why should I even notice my existence as having any *giver* other than my parents, the laws of genetics and the random vagaries of circumstance?

I can also take Ignatius' list of gifts for *granted* in a more literal sense. Yes, I might say, all these things have been granted me, but if they have been really *given*, freely given—with no strings attached—then aren't they mine now and beyond any appeal from the giver, beyond any expectation of response from me? But is a gift I take for granted like that still a gift in any strong sense?

The Gift, the Giver and the Gifted

Maybe the idea of gift is not so straightforward after all. What does it take for a gift to be a gift? Let me sketch three conditions that we might agree on: one each for the gift, the giver and the gifted.

First, doesn't a gift have to be something we actually value? No matter how well we attempt to disassemble, the gifts we value only because they have been given rarely excite delight. A niece's ill-made birthday card might do it, but another Christmas circular letter probably won't. Gift and value go together, but value is a mutable thing. The gift of a slap in the face might not be much of a gift when it is still stinging, but years later might be seen as the gift of a turning point—the cannon ball that changes a life. The value of a gift—and where it comes from—is part of the puzzle.

A second condition is that a gift must have a giver—so far so obvious—but it also has to be *seen* to have one. The box of chocolates that turns up anonymously in the post might be a gift or it might not. It might be a clerical error; it might even be an insult—'Fatty!'—or the unwanted attention of a stalker. That is because a gift is a communication or it isn't really a gift. Is the world 'out there' a gift? For it to be so we have to value it and we have to see it as being given by someone; given intentionally; given to me; and given to say something. Hence the *Contemplatio*'s preliminary points: we show love by sharing what we value and—*vice versa*—we realise we are loved when we get the message of the gift, when we hear in the gift the heart of the giver.

God's problem—if I can call it that—is that all God's gifts have other givers too, or at least they have quite normal origins in the natural order. I don't thank the florist who delivers the flowers you send me in quite the same way as I thank you. I certainly don't thank the rosebush, the soil, the rain, the sun. So can I thank *God* for the roses *you* send me? And, if I do, am I diminishing your gift? Ignatius is inviting us to view all our



life as *doubly* gifted and all our experience as the fruit of a double agency. Perhaps this is the challenge of finding God in all things.

I keep using the language of seeing, viewing, and that should alert us to a third condition: every gift needs a recipient—what I have called ‘the gifted’—as much as it needs a giver, because every gift needs not just to be seen but to be ‘seen *as*’: seen as gift. If the gift is a way for the giver to communicate, every gift needs a recipient to interpret that communication, to see it as a gift and not a threat or just a lump of stuff. Receiving a gift is an act of imagination, and so an act of freedom. Look how we can misinterpret gifts—accidentally or wilfully. Is that gold watch meant to delight me, obligate me, bribe me, or make me turn up on time? Every gift requires a response or it fails as a gift. Minimally, I can accept the gift or refuse it. Maximally, I can let it change my life—how *do* I live my life after the transplant of a donated heart? Gifts change us, and they change us by creating or developing a relationship with the giver.

Market Economy and Gift Economy

The nature of that response and relationship can be problematic, especially when what we give lies at the overlap of two totally different economies—the economy of the gift and the economy of the market.² I take the title of this article from Tom McGuiness’s ‘Communion Song’: ‘I know the gift is freely given, hard to understand, and I know the gift can only

² A very funny illustration of the confusion of economies can be found in an episode of *The Big Bang Theory* entitled the ‘The Bath Item Gift Hypothesis’.

be returned'.³ I've prayed with those lines many times, been deeply moved by them to respond with my own 'return', but I must admit there is always a corner of my mind captured by an image of all those queues in Marks and Spencers after Christmas—all those gifts that can only be returned! ... What does it say to the gift-giver when we return what he or she gave to get something we would like better? Can gifts *ever* be exchangeable, interchangeable, without losing their 'giftiness'? Societies have tended to solve the problem of exchange first through barter and then by inventing money—a way for any thing to be exchanged for any other. We are so immersed in an economy of exchange that we are not surprised that gift giving and gift receiving only survive in our culture in quite restricted circumstances—very often private ones. The US poet and essayist Lewis Hyde—whom I am going to be quoting a lot—puts it this way:

Every culture offers its citizens an image of what it is to be a man or woman of substance. There have been times and places in which a person came into his or her social being through the dispersal of gifts, the 'big man' or 'big woman' being that one through whom most gifts flowed. The mythology of the market society reverses the picture: getting rather than giving is the mark of a substantial person, and the hero is 'self-possessed', 'self-made'.⁴

A gift economy runs on the dispersal of gifts rather than the possession of property. So what is a gift economy like? Hyde sums it up with a Just So story of the origin of the phrase 'Indian giver':

An Englishman comes into an Indian lodge, and his hosts, wishing to make their guest feel welcome, ask him to share a pipe of tobacco. Carved from a soft red stone, the pipe itself is a peace offering that has traditionally circulated among the local tribes, staying in each lodge for a time but always given away sooner or later. And so the Indians, as is only polite among their people, give the pipe to their guest when he leaves. The Englishman is tickled pink. What a nice thing to send back to the British Museum! He takes it home and sets it on the mantelpiece. A time passes and the leaders of a neighbouring tribe come to visit the colonist's home. To his surprise he finds his guests have some expectation in regard to his pipe, and his translator finally explains to him that if he wishes to show his goodwill he

³ Tom McGuinness, 'Communion Song', *Jesuits and Friends* (Summer 2010), 8–9.

⁴ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), xiii (subsequent references in the text). More recent editions have the subtitle *How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*.

should offer them a smoke and give them the pipe. In consternation the Englishman invents a phrase to describe these people with such a limited sense of private property—Indian givers. The opposite of 'Indian giver' would be something like 'white man keeper' (or maybe capitalist), that is, a person whose instinct is to remove property from circulation, to put it in a warehouse or museum ... or lay it aside to be used for production. (3–4)

He goes on:

The Indian giver ... understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead You may keep your Christmas present, but it ceases to be a gift in the true sense unless you have given something else away The only essential is that the gift must always move. (4)

So, whether we look at the ethnography of the Pacific islands, the potlatch of the Pacific North West Indians, Roman laws of real estate, a Hindu epic, Germanic dowry customs, or the Old Testament institutions of jubilee or first fruits or sacrifice or the prohibition of usury—wherever we look we find that 'gift economies tend to be marked by three related obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to accept, and the obligation to reciprocate' (xv).

All this talk of obligation makes one a little uneasy: we find it hard to value a gift that has to be given—we cherish the freedom of the giving and the freedom of the keeping. Just this uneasiness brought the idea of gift into a central place in postmodern thought when Jacques Derrida took it up and raised it to the level of a contradiction.⁵ In his view, at the very heart of the idea of gift is the idea of obligation. A gift leaves the recipient indebted while it increases the giver's status: something is taken from the recipient and added to the giver, which is the very opposite of what a gift is supposed to do. No matter how generous the intention, Derrida believes, a gift increases the power of the giver and reduces the liberty of the recipient. And, grudgingly, we must recognise some truth in it. Why else are some people too proud for charity? Why else do we sometimes mean it when we say 'you shouldn't have'?

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⁵ For example, Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: U. of Chicago P, 1992) or Jacques Derrida, 'On the Gift', in *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*, edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999).

If Derrida's understanding exhausted the idea of gift the *Contemplatio* would be nonsense—or, worse, a kind of manipulation with God saying 'look at all I've given you: now be grateful'. Whenever I have talked to people about Derrida's deconstruction of gift I have encountered a powerful resistance, a deeply felt need to defend the gift. But surely Derrida is right, at least, that the idea of gift seems to demand an obligation in tension with its gratuity. We are hooked on free gratuity and hate the thought that there might be anything conditional in God's love for us or God's forgiveness of us. We think that any strings attached would make the gift worthless, the grace tainted. My own temptation is to take the gift for granted, as I described earlier, as fully and freely given and so already all my own.

But the truth of the gift lies somewhere off the scale defined between binding obligation and utter gratuity. Ignatius knows that. He expects that the heartfelt knowledge of our giftedness *will* move us to want to give up everything in return but he can only *offer* the *Suscipe* as an example of, as he says, how I 'in all reason and justice ... ought to offer ... all I possess ... making a gift with heartfelt love'.

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will—all that I have and possess. You, Lord, have given all that to me. I now give it back to you, O Lord. All of it is yours. Dispose of it according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for that is enough for me. (Exx 234)

He cannot force us to gratitude. He cannot shame us into love—though he comes close to trying. He cannot even tell us to go through the motions. He can only hope that we will recognise the gifts we have received as signs of love and hope we will be moved to love in the same self-giving way.

But, even in matters of love, giving and receiving are delicate. Self-giving can too easily be manipulated or shade into something abusive. Imagine if it were not Ignatius but God saying 'look at all I've done for you' We would doubt—even despise—such a God. We need God to give with no thought of return and yet, even regarding love, when we give most freely we know that the gift would not be fully given if it were not accepted and were not reciprocated. The *Contemplatio* is an enormous risk.

The Gift

These first thoughts about gift have rather complicated things! I hope that some further exploration might begin to offer some clarity. I have already been quoting Lewis Hyde: I think that of all the writers who have written about gift it is he who brings out its beauty the best. He agrees

with Ignatius that the economies of love and gift cannot be separated. The first edition of his book *The Gift*, from 1983, has the wonderful subtitle *Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*.

So, let us start again: what makes a gift a gift? Hyde puts it this way: 'a gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is *bestowed* on us.' (xi) He starts to undo Derrida's puzzle by taking as his prime example of gift the gift of talent, the gift of creative inspiration, the gift of being 'gifted'. Artists work, they labour and trudge as much as any of us, but they only begin really to value their own work when they feel that at least 'some portion of [their] creation is bestowed upon [them]' (xii). Only when they sense something being given in their creative activity can they feel it is authentic and exhilarating and alive. A parallel process goes on when we enjoy their work. Hyde says,

The art that matters to us—which moves the heart, or revives the soul, or delights the senses, or offers courage for living ... that work is received by us as a gift is received. Even if we have paid a fee at the door ... something comes to us which has nothing to do with the price. (xii)

But should the work of art itself be seen a gift, given away and not sold? How can the gift of art survive in a market economy? These are Hyde's questions as a writer and poet, but we might ask the same about ministry.

We have already heard Hyde contrasting the Indian giver and the white-man keeper, exploring the way the gift demands to be handed on. Typically, in a gift economy, gift-giving and the barter of commerce exist in parallel but are governed by quite different ethics. First, in contrast to the familiar haggling of the marketplace, there is always a strong prohibition on discussing the value of a gift. Someone 'may wonder what will come in return for his gift', Hyde says, 'but he is not supposed to bring it up Partners in barter talk and talk until they strike a balance, but the gift is given in silence.' (15)

The second ethic of gift is that the value of a gift and the gift that will be given in return are totally in the hands of the one who has first received—contrary to Derrida's understanding. Writing of Pacific islanders Hyde says,

If a man gives a second-rate necklace in return for a fine set of arm-shells, people may talk, but there is nothing anyone can do about it It is as if you give a part of your substance to your gift partner and then wait in silence until he gives you a part of his. You put yourself in his hands. (15)

Where gift cultures differ even more from market economies is when the circle of the gift widens beyond reciprocal exchange, when one gives to another, who gives to a third, etc. Then some interesting facets of gift become apparent. Among some Maori tribes in New Zealand, for example, the hunters go into the forest and return with birds for food. They give a portion of the kill to the priests, who then cook it on a sacred fire, eat some themselves and prepare a talisman from the remainder which they see as being a physical embodiment of the spirit of the forest. The talisman is taken back to the forest as a gift; a gift they believe makes the forest abundant. They call it 'feeding the spirit'. There are three distinct gifts in this hunting ritual: the forest, the hunters and the priests each give food. As Hyde says, 'with a simple give-and-take, the hunters may begin to think of the forest as a place to turn a profit' (18). The extra priestly step in the cycle saves the forest from over-hunting and makes it abundant.

Notice two things. First, gift-giving is tied up with increase and abundance, but not with profit. What distinguishes the fruit of the gift from the profit of trade is that profit is taken out of the circle by the one who trades while the fruit of the gift circulates to sustain general abundance. Hyde adds, 'The gift moves towards an empty place. As it turns in its circle it turns toward him who has been empty-handed the longest.' (23) Second, the gift circle naturally involves the spirit. Giving keeps the spirit of the gift alive—in this case the forest's spirit—but more generally a gift always carries the giver's spirit: to give is to give a part of oneself. Hyde says, 'It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection' (56).



We know the gift has the power to establish relationships: think of the gifts at weddings, even modern ones. It also has the power to restore broken relationships: think of all those making-up gifts. Hyde reports that among the tribes of the Pacific North West,

When someone ... was mistakenly insulted, his response, rather than turning to a libel lawyer, was to give a gift to the man who had insulted him; if indeed the insult was mistaken, the man would make a return gift, adding a little extra to demonstrate his goodwill. (36)

The gift's power of restoration extends to the gift of redemption. There is a group of folk-tales and religious stories that show it takes the gift of the god's own body to restore what has been broken apart. It reminds us that *atonement* is at heart a gift—all the theories that make it payment of a debt or any kind of transaction miss the mark by a mile. Hyde compares it with what goes on between kidney donors—they go to extraordinary lengths to make sure the recipient never thinks of the donation in any other way than as an unconditional gift. He says, 'recipients are aware of their relationship to the donor as it exists over and above this particular gift, and their gratitude is not a response to the gift so much as to the affection it carries. When the affection is missing so is the gratitude.' (69) And it the contrary holds too:

We cannot become really bound to those who give us false gifts. And true gifts constrain us only if we do not pass them along—only, I mean, if we fail to respond with an act or an expression of gratitude. (70)

Gratitude brings us to the heart of what Hyde has to say about gift: the labour of gratitude. All gifts transform us in their reception to some degree, but it is in the nature of some gifts to change our lives. Hyde uses the example of the gifts of the gifted, those who receive the gift of creativity.

Most artists are converted to art by art itself. The future artist finds himself or herself moved by a work of art, and through that experience, comes to labour in the service of art until he can profess his own gifts. (47)

He goes on: 'I would like to speak of gratitude as a labour undertaken by the soul to effect the transformation after a gift has been received'.

Receiving a gift takes time and labour, a labour of learning that Hyde calls gratitude:

Between the time a gift comes to us and the time we pass it along, we suffer gratitude. Moreover, with gifts that are agents of change, it is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we have come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again. Passing the gift along is the act of gratitude that finishes the labour. (47)

Instead of being an act of self-destitution handing on the gift is a coming into one's own transformed nature. Hyde says, 'The transformation is not accomplished until we have the power to give the gift on our own terms. Therefore, the end of the labour of gratitude is similarity with the gift or with its donor.' (47)

Contemplatio ad Amorem

The outcome of the labour of gratitude is that we become like the giver of the gift: that I think is the real grace of the *Contemplatio*—to let ourselves be made over by gratitude into the likeness of God. To become givers as God is giver, lovers as God is lover.

I started this article by sharing my puzzlement that Ignatius focuses a contemplation to attain love so intensely upon gift. I find all this talk of gift has enlarged my puzzlement into something like wonder. The *Contemplatio* cannot be a trade of any kind, not even a spiritual one: it transcends both obligation and gratuity, defeats logic with *eros*. It is the receiving of the spirit of the God who endlessly gives without depletion, and the willing and ever-continuing transformation of the recipient into someone who can pass that spirit onwards, ever more fully.

The *Contemplatio* does not only dispose us to 'attain love'—it seeks a gift of union, communion; it invites us to live as God lives and love as God loves by loving life and living life as gift, and giving life as gift; it invites us to make all our living and loving a work of art.

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