

The One Who Is; the One Who Gives: Derrida, Aquinas, and the Dilemma of the Divine Generosity

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IT IS A FAVORITE TECHNIQUE of those trained in the Derridean deconstructionist method to find a loose thread—an anomaly, a contradiction, an unresolved tension—in even the most venerable philosophical weave and then to pull on it until the fabric comes undone. A prime example of this is the way a number of postmodern thinkers, including Jacques Derrida himself, tugged on the thread of the *aporia* (or dilemma) of the gift in order to problematize central claims of the religious traditions.¹ I would like to turn the tables on the postmodern philosophers by using their own method, pulling the loose thread of their very critique of the *aporia* of the gift. For it is my contention that their analysis of the anomalies within the idea of giftedness can actually serve to clarify what stands distinctively at the heart of the Christian spiritual and philosophical tradition. I will use the texts of Saint Thomas Aquinas to make my argument.

The *Aporia* of the Gift

The postmodern preoccupation with the theme of the gift finds its roots in the sociological work of the French thinker Marcel Mauss. In his studies of primal peoples, Mauss uncovered the dynamics of an economy of exchange, whereby the giving of a gift by one tribal chief would prompt in his rival an answering gift, lest the latter be shamed by the former.²

¹ See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*, vol. 1. *Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Knauf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

² Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Expanded Edition*, trans. Jane I. Guyer (Chicago: Hau

Émile Benveniste engaged in similar research, which revealed that, in some cultures, one act of hospitality would awaken in the one who received it an act of even more extravagant hospitality, which would in turn compel the original giver to give even more generously, until the two communities essentially ruined one another through a kind of mutual shaming. This is why Benveniste could playfully suggest an etymological link between “hospitality” and the Latin word *hostis* (enemy).³

In texts such as *Given Time* and *Aporias*, Derrida elaborates upon this phenomenon in a more strictly philosophical vein. It appears, he says, that the first condition of the authentic gift is that it is offered without consideration of compensation. Were strings attached to a present that I have made, one would be hard-pressed to refer to it as a true gift. Indeed, were I to receive such a present, I would not feel gratified and grateful, but manipulated. Even a gift as seemingly uncomplicated as a birthday present from a relative carries with it at least the implicit obligation of writing a thank-you note as compensation. Anyone who has ever had the exquisitely awkward experience of confronting a person who plaintively and resentfully observes, “I hope you received the gift I gave you,” feels the force of this demand. The second fundamental condition for the possibility of a gift is presence, that is to say, the appearance of the gift *qua* gift. If some boon appeared simply out of the blue, with no indication as to its provenance, one might consider it luck or good fortune, but one would hardly call it a gift, except in the most blandly metaphorical sense.

Derrida argues that, once we acknowledge these two indispensable conditions, it is difficult to see how a true gift is even possible, for the moment something appears *qua* gift, it would seem, necessarily, to awaken in the recipient the need to reciprocate. Precisely as a present, a gift can never be free, and in order to be free, it cannot be present. On this score, Derrida rejoices in the delicious link between the English “gift” and the German “*Gift*,” designating poison: the need for a response or reciprocation poisons the waters, so to speak, of the pure gift. Finally, any gift is noxious for both giver and receiver, since it locks both into a mutually destructive economy of exchange.

Now, the full exploration of this motif in the postmoderns would take us way too far afield, but for our purposes, it might be worthwhile to note some troubling implications for the classical Christian tradition, for which the notions of gift and grace are obviously so crucial. It is elemental

Books, 2016), 55–75, 85–87, 113–17, 120, 121–30, 144.

³ Émile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016), 46–47, 61, 66–67, 70–71.

for Christian philosophy and theology, and perhaps from the Derridean perspective most problematically, that worship is an act of thanksgiving, an obligation to return to God what God has given. That Derrida himself was aware that the *aporia* of the gift poses problems for Christianity in particular is made manifest in his insistence that the only kind of messianism that is viable is a messianism without a messiah, that is to say, an expectation of a divine gift that never really arrives. His famous characterization of deconstruction as the attitude of “viens, oui, oui!” is conditioned by the assurance that the definitive Other, the final answer to our longing, never actually comes.⁴

God as Giver of Gifts

Far from undermining central claims of Christianity, the Derridean dilemma provides, in fact, a route of access to understanding central Christian mysteries more fully. It serves, if you will, as the grit in the oyster around which the pearl forms—and Thomas Aquinas helps us to appreciate this. Indeed, the term “gift” (*donum*) and its variants appear 1,756 times in the writings of Saint Thomas.⁵ As we shall see anon, the word turns up with special frequency in regard to the Holy Spirit, but another particularly prominent context for its usage is Aquinas’s discussion of creation, wherein God is typically characterized as the one who *dat esse* (gives being). What I shall endeavor to show first is that, granted the Derridean prerequisites of presence and utter gratuitousness, the truest gift possible is that which comes from God in the act of creation.

Though these issues are broached frequently in Thomas’s writing, perhaps the clearest and most succinct presentation is found in a text from the very beginning of the master’s career, composed in the early 1250s, namely, the *De ente et essentia* (*On Being and Essence*). The young Aquinas uses the distinction between essence and existence to clarify both the nature of God and the unique relationship that obtains between the infinite God and finite things. In chapter 4 of the *De ente et essentia*, Thomas proves the reality of the distinction between the two principles through a sort of thought experiment. It is altogether possible, he says, to consider a *quidditas* apart from the actual existence of the essence under

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 116; cited in John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 100. English translation edited by John P. Leavey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁵ Determined using Index Thomisticus search engine found at www.corpusthomicum.org/it/index.age.

consideration.⁶ One can think, he suggests, of the nature of a phoenix, even though no such animal exists.⁷ Putting the matter in an even broader context, we can notice the demarcation in the very fact that nothing in our immediate experience has to exist, that nothing in the world, in a word, possesses a nature that requires actual existence.

Now, in regard to those things in which this real metaphysical distinction obtains, we must look for an extrinsic cause, or to state the matter a bit differently, for an agent that effected the juxtaposition of essence and existence, some cause that actualized this particular potentiality toward being. Following a logical rhythm familiar from many of his later writings, the young Thomas argues that this extrinsic cause is either self-explanatory or itself derived from a cause extrinsic to its nature.⁸ Because a series of caused causes, subordinated *per se*, cannot proceed infinitely, we must arrive finally at some reality whose nature is *to be*, in whom essence and existence coincide, and who is, therefore, responsible for the being of any and all things in whom essence and existence are distinct. This unconditioned reality, Thomas continues, can only be characterized as *actus purus* ("pure actuality").⁹ By definition, this being cannot be limited by either an extrinsic cause or an intrinsic principle.¹⁰ Anything marked by the play between essence and existence could be further actualized, rendered more perfect, but the reality in whom essence and existence coincide could not possibly be "improved" in any way or more fully realized. Nothing could add to its being; it could benefit from no ontological gift. It is this utterly distinctive and strange source of finite existence that thoughtful people call God.

What does this analysis tell us about the creaturely mode of existence? Here I would like to turn to the great texts on creation in both the *Summa theologiae* and the disputed question *De potentia* (*On the Power of God*). From the essence–existence (*esse*) distinction Thomas draws the logical conclusion that the coming-to-be of finite things must be continual and *ex nihilo*.¹¹ Since nothing in the nature of a creature requires it to be, its ongoing existence must be the result of the continual influence of the one

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4, no. 3, in *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1968), 53.

⁷ Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4, no. 6 (p. 55).

⁸ Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4, no. 7 (p. 56).

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 9, a. 1.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4, nos. 6–7 (pp. 55–57).

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1952), q. 3, a. 3, ad 6.

in whom essence and existence come together. Moreover, since the entirety of the creature's being is dependent, the creative act by which it is sustained must be distinguished from all forms of making, or fashioning from something. God does not shape anything preexistent to form a creature.¹² Similarly, creation is not a type of motion, since it involves no transition from potency to act; nor is it a temporal act, since time is the measure of motion. In *De potentia*, Thomas gives this rather apophatic description of creation: "realiter quam relatio quaedam ad Deum cum novitate essendi [a relation of the creature to the Creator together with a beginning of existence with the newness of being]."¹³ He is using the familiar Aristotelian category of relation, but, as is his wont, he is giving it a radically transformed meaning. On the standard reading, a relation obtains between two beings, but in regard to creation this cannot be the case, since there is literally nothing independent of the act of creation by which God establishes the relationship. As Thomas says, "God at the same time gives being and produces that which receives being."¹⁴

From this exposition, we must conclude that every creature is a sheer and unadulterated gift, for there is, quite literally, nothing in the *to-be* of a creature that has not been given by another. The same could not be said of finite things within a standard Aristotelian or Platonic context. Thomas, we might argue, has given careful metaphysical expression to Paul's observation: "What do you have that you have not received?" (1 Cor 4:7). In the second place, we must conclude that the source of creaturely being has absolutely no need of creation. The entire universe, even in principle, would add nothing to God's perfection, for any such addition would be repugnant to God's unconditioned mode of existence. As Robert Sokolowski, one of the most trenchant analysts of the metaphysics of creation, put it, "God plus the world is not greater than God alone,"¹⁵ and "After creation, there are more beings, but no more perfection of *esse* (being)."¹⁶ We might usefully contrast this account with the theologies emerging from the Greek and Roman myths, according to which the gods are co-implicated with the world in a range of shared obligations and needs, as well as with Hegelianism and its many offshoots, which call for a rapport of mutual dependency between God and creation.

¹² Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 12; q. 3, a. 4, resp.; *ST I*, q. 45, a. 1.

¹³ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 3, no. 8.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 1, ad 17.

¹⁵ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 8.

¹⁶ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, 42.

The classical philosophical accounts, the mythic presentations, and the Hegelian construal of the God–world relationship would, accordingly, all be susceptible to the Derridean critique of the gift, but Thomas Aquinas’s account is not. Thomas’s explanation allows for both conditions of giftedness—namely, receiving a gift without necessary compensation and presence of the gift *qua* gift—to be realized simultaneously. Once we have grasped the truth of the essence–existence distinction in creatures, we understand that their being is not their own, that they indeed present themselves, they show up in the world, in gift form. This metaphysical truth is beautifully honored in the German expression for “there is,” namely, *es gibt* (“it gives”). Thus the criterion of presence is met. More to it, the one who ultimately gives the gift, the one who by his nature simply is, cannot even in principle benefit from what he offers. And thus the criterion of sheer liberality is met.

A beautiful text from the fourth article of question 44 of the first part of the *Summa theologiae* catches so many aspects of this uniquely generous rapport between the one who is and those things that are. Under the aegis of considering whether God is the final cause of all creatures, Thomas speaks of the manner in which creaturely agents act: “Some things, however, are both agent and patient at the same time: these are imperfect agents, and to these it belongs to intend, even while acting, the acquisition of something. But it does not belong to the First Agent, Who is agent only, to act for the acquisition of some end.”¹⁷ Created actors, in other words, even as they influence others are themselves influenced; even as they give to others, they themselves receive. But this type of mutuality cannot obtain in regard to God. As the first objection to this article states: “It would seem that God is not the final cause of all things. For to act for an end seems to imply need of the end. But God needs nothing. Therefore it does not become him to act for an end.”¹⁸ Aquinas’s typically pithy response seems to anticipate the concerns of Mauss and Derrida by seven centuries: “To act from need belongs only to an imperfect agent, which by its nature is both agent and patient. But this does not belong to God, and therefore He alone is the most perfectly liberal giver [*et ideo ipse solus est maxime liberalis*], because He does not act for His own profit, but only for His own goodness.”¹⁹

¹⁷ *ST* I, q. 44, a. 4, corp.

¹⁸ *ST* I, q. 44, a. 4, obj. 1.

¹⁹ *ST* I, q. 44, a. 4, ad 1.

God's Highest Name

The upshot of the foregoing discussion is that God's capacity truly to give is predicated upon God's absolutely unique manner of existence, giving following from being. And this clarification brings to mind a debate that was of keen importance to the medievals and that has been resurrected in our time by a former student of Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, who is one of the world's most prominent Catholic philosophers. Marion, who has wrestled for decades with the *aporias* and possibilities of the idea of giftedness, argued in his influential text *Dieu sans l'être* (*God Without Being*) that "goodness" is God's highest or most proper name,²⁰ and that the title "being" or "the one who is" carries with it the danger of idolatry.²¹ Showing why he is wrong about this will help us refine our answer to Derrida's original challenge.

Marion argues that the name "existence" or "being" falls so neatly into our cognitive categories that when we ascribe it to God, we run the severe risk of reducing God to the level of comprehensible things. Hence the application of the concept of *esse* to God, even when pushed and expanded in the direction of total transcendence, tends to foster in the mind of the philosopher a kind of intellectual complacency, a sense of having corralled and understood God. Calling explicitly into question the tradition, running from Thomas Aquinas to Étienne Gilson, that defends the thesis that *qui est* is God's highest name, Marion sides with Thomas's Franciscan counterpart, Saint Bonaventure, who famously argued in *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (*The Mind's Road to God*) that, though being is God's highest Old Testament name, goodness or love is a higher name still, since it designates the play of the Trinitarian persons.²² Bonaventure (and Marion) adopt the Platonic-Dionysian view that the good, that which gives, is "beyond the beings,"²³ that is to say, metaphysically antecedent

²⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 73–83.

²¹ Marion, *God Without Being*, 33–49.

²² Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, ch. 5, no. 2, in *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, the Tree of Life, and the Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 94–95; ch. 6, nos. 1–2 (pp. 102–4).

²³ Jeffrey L. Kosky, "Contemporary Encounters with Apophatic Theology: The Case of Emmanuel Levinas," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 1, no. 3 (2000): 14: "To again cite the classic text from [Pseudo-Dionysius's] *Mystical Theology*, 'Since it is the Cause of all beings we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all the affirmations, since it surpasses all being' (MT 1000B). These negations correspond to the movement of return whereby the created soul passes beyond the

to the gift of existence itself. And this transcendence of even the most abstract category of the mind implies that the language of goodness, applied to God, is less susceptible to idolatrous misuse and can serve as a properly iconic manner of naming the divine reality.

A careful consideration of Thomas's texts on this matter of the divine naming sheds quite a bit of light on the general problem that we have been examining in this paper. First, no one can possibly doubt that Aquinas had a thoroughgoing knowledge of the Dionysian tradition, which he first took in as a young apprentice to Albertus Magnus and which he continued to integrate into his own work throughout his career.²⁴ Père Marie-Dominique Chenu is certainly correct in asserting that Dionysius's *exitus–reditus* program provides the chief structuring element in Thomas's mature theological program.²⁵ The Dionysian influence is especially clear in Aquinas's treatment of God's nature, creation, and theological language. And thus it is of considerable interest to note that Aquinas consciously and repeatedly departs from the Dionysian heritage on the key question of God's highest name. His reasons must have been serious ones.

There are two principal passages from the *Summa theologiae* worth examining in this regard. The first is *ST* I, q. 5, a. 2, which considers whether good is prior in idea to being—the familiar Dionysian proposal. In his crisp response, Thomas argues that what is prior in idea is what is first conceived by the intellect. But the first thing that the intellect can possibly conceive is being, since actuality is the objective correlate of any and all acts of knowledge. “Hence, being is the proper object of the intellect, and is primarily intelligible; as sound is what is primarily audible.”²⁶ But what of the explicit Dionysian priority given to the good? Thomas answers this objection by a subtle but crucial elision of terms in an Aristotelian direction.²⁷ For the Stagyrte, and Thomas follows him here, goodness always has the nature of an end, that is to say, as something desirable. As such, it has a sort of causal primacy over being, since even prime matter is moved to form by its attraction to an end. However, precisely as an end, the good must be equivalent to some perfection of being, since actuality is what

beings which manifest the divine cause in the direction of the unmanifest, hidden source of creation.”

²⁴ See Bernhard Blankenhorn, *The Mystery of Union with God: Dionysian Mysticism in Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas*, Thomistic Ressourcement 4 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

²⁵ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1963), 304–7.

²⁶ *ST* I, q. 5, a. 2, corp.

²⁷ *ST* I, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1.

any agent seeks. Hence, being reasserts itself in the prime position.²⁸ This Aristotelian transposition allows Aquinas to recover the Dionysian assertion that the good is diffusive of itself, not so much in terms of efficient causality, but of final causality. What permits God to give so dramatically and over such a universal range is, once again, the properly unconditioned quality of his manner of being.

The second principal text to examine is *ST* I, q. 13, a. 11, in which Thomas explicitly asks, "Whether this name, He Who Is, is the most proper name of God." The second objection cuts to the issue raised from the pseudo-Dionysius to Marion: "The name of good excellently manifests all the processions of God" (Dionysius, *Div. Nom.* iii). 'Good,' however, especially belongs to God as the universal principle of all things. Therefore, this name good is supremely proper to God, and not this name He Who Is.²⁹ The objector is referring, of course, not simply to the procession of finite things from God in creation, but to the more primordial processions that obtain within the Trinity. Thus, he implicitly gives voice to the Bonaventurian objection that being, however sacred a name, is an Old Testament designation, superseded by the New Testament name of goodness or love.

Before turning to Thomas's answer to this particular argument, let us look at the substance of his *respondeo*. Since, he argues, the name "being" designates not any particular mode of existence, but existence itself, and since God is uniquely to be categorized as *ipsum esse*, this term is maximally appropriate to God. His second argument hinges on the universality of the name "He Who Is." "For all other names are either less universal, or, if convertible with it, add something above it at least in idea; hence in a certain way they inform and determine it."³⁰ Once again, following his Aristotelian instinct, Thomas says that the name "good" is simply convertible with the name "being," since the desirable and the actual coincide. Moreover, in the measure that goodness designates causality, it modifies or specifies the idea of being, occupying, therefore, a less universal place in the conceptual hierarchy.

And this is precisely the approach he takes in responding to the Dionysian second objector. The name "good," Thomas insists, is indeed the principal name of God insofar as he is a cause (*bonum diffusivum sui* [the good is diffusive of itself]), but it does not designate the divine being in itself,

²⁸ *ST* I, q. 5, a. 2, ad 1.

²⁹ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 11, obj. 2.

³⁰ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 11, resp.

for “existence considered absolutely comes before the idea of a cause.”³¹ This sentence is perhaps the best one-line summary of my argument. In line with the adage “*nemo dat quod non habet*” (“no one can give what he does not have”), Thomas maintains that whatever truth is conveyed by the name “good” is necessarily subordinate to and conditioned by the truth conveyed by the name *esse*. Or to transpose this discussion from the linguistic to the metaphysical dimension, it is only because God exists in such a distinctive manner that he is able to give in such an utterly generous and gratuitous way.

The Holy Spirit as *Donum*

To this point, we have been following Thomas’s teaching regarding God as such in relation to the created realm. I would now like to move into even deeper waters, searching out the play between being and gift that can be found within the Trinitarian relations. One of the deftest moves that Aquinas makes is to show that the simplicity of the divine nature and the plurality of the divine persons are not only not mutually repugnant, but in point of fact mutually implicative. We might characterize the logical moves as follows. Because God is simple, God must be perfect, since simplicity implies pure actuality.³² But if God is perfect, he must be in possession of every ontological perfection, including intelligence.³³ And if God is intelligent and his intelligence unlimited, then he must be able to form an *imago* of himself, an interior Word. Further, through his intelligence, he must grasp the interior Word as supremely good, and hence must love it, since will is a consequence of understanding the good as good. Therefore, the very simplicity of God implies a relationship between Father (the generator of the interior Word), the Son (the interior Word), and the Holy Spirit (the love that obtains between Father and Son).³⁴

Though “love” indeed is a principal name of the Spirit, the other great name for the third person of the Trinity is *donum* (“gift”), and this brings us back to our central theme. Saint Thomas explores the ramifications and implications of this mode of nomination in *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2, in which he asks “Whether ‘gift’ is the proper name of the Holy Spirit.”³⁵ In his *respondeo*, Aquinas cites Aristotle to the effect that “a gift is properly an unreturnable giving” (“*donum proprie est datio irredibilis*”) and hence

³¹ *ST I*, q. 13, a. 11, ad 2.

³² *ST I*, q. 4, a. 1.

³³ *ST I*, q. 4, a. 2.

³⁴ *ST I*, qq. 33–38.

³⁵ *ST I*, q. 38.

carries with it the sense of gratuitous donation.³⁶ However, the *ratio* or intelligible form of gratuitous donation is love, since we give a person a gift only “forasmuch as we wish him well.”³⁷ Therefore, it follows that love “has the nature of a first gift, through which all free gifts are given.”³⁸ And this is why Saint Augustine can say, “Many gifts, which are proper to each one, are divided in common among all the members of Christ by the Gift which is the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ The Holy Spirit is the metaphysical matrix of both the act of creation and the gracing that enables human beings to participate in the divine life. But what I want to make clear is that the condition for the possibility of this kind of donation, even within the inner life of the Trinity, is the simplicity shared by the Father and the Son. Were the Father to benefit in any sense from the Son or the Son from the Father, then the love that they share would not be absolute; it would in fact be marked by a kind of Derridean economy of exchange. Therefore, in singling out the proper name of the Holy Spirit, Thomas has uncovered the ultimate solution for the *aporia* of the gift.

The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit

After this rather heady exploration of the nature of God, the act of creation, and the Trinitarian relations, let us return, in this final section, to the ground and the very concrete observations of the postmoderns regarding the impossibility of interpersonal gift-giving. I believe that the observations made by Derrida and his colleagues are, in point of fact, quite right: it is virtually impossible, within a purely natural framework, to offer a true gift, especially when we take our fallen condition into account. Most realistic political philosophers and ethicists—Aristotle, Augustine, Hobbes, Machiavelli, Adam Smith, John Rawls—take for granted the elements of self-interest that inevitably mark every type of human interaction at the natural level. A society, great or small, based on authentic gift-giving is correctly viewed as utopian.

But what makes all the difference is the peculiar Christian claim that the divine manner of being and action, which we have been exploring, can, through grace, become our manner of being and action. Those who are, naturally speaking, utterly incapable of escaping the economy of exchange,

³⁶ *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2, resp.

³⁷ *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2, resp. (slightly different translation).

³⁸ *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2, resp.

³⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 15.19.34, in *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, *The Fathers of the Church* 45 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 500. See *ST I*, q. 38, a. 2.

can become sons and daughters of the God whose very nature is disinterested love. And this brings us to a consideration of the divine missions and the indwelling of the one whose proper name is *donum* (gift).

Saint Thomas treats of the divine sendings in *ST* I, q. 43. To be sure, all three persons of the Trinity are in any and all creatures through “essence, presence, and power,”⁴⁰ in the measure that God the creator sustains them in being. However, particular divine persons are said to be sent inasmuch as they commence to exist in rational creatures in a new way, dwelling in them “as in his own Temple.”⁴¹ Specifically, the Son is “sent” in the sense that he becomes the object of a rational creature’s intellect and the Spirit in the sense that he becomes the object of that creature’s will.⁴² Possessed by the Holy Spirit, the human will becomes radically ordered to the love that the Spirit is, or to state the same thing in other words, it receives the theological virtue of charity. In *ST* I-II, q. 62, a. 3, we find this extraordinary description of this greatest of the theological virtues: “A certain spiritual union whereby the will is, so to speak, transformed into that end,” that is to say, into the Holy Spirit himself.⁴³ Throughout his treatment of the divine missions and the theological virtues, Thomas occasionally references the text of 2 Peter, according to which we become “participants of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4).⁴⁴ This discussion segues neatly into the description of charity in the *secunda secundae* as a type of friendship with God. Following Aristotle’s famous description, Thomas argues that friendship is indeed a relationship in which each partner wills the good of the other, distinguishing it from relationships of utility.⁴⁵ But the Angelic Doctor moves beyond Aristotle and says that real mutuality and communication must obtain in an authentic friendship: “*Talis autem mutua benevolentia fundatur super aliqua communicatione*” (“For such well-wishing is founded on some kind of communication”).⁴⁶ This ecstatic communication occurs when God wills our happiness, and we will the glory of God, which redounds, in turn, to our greater happiness. Possessed by the Holy Spirit, we can love with the very love with which God loves; therefore, we can give gifts as generously as God does. How do we resolve the *aporia* of the gift? We can do so only through recourse to God and those whom God deigns to make saints.

⁴⁰ *ST* I, q. 8, a. 3.

⁴¹ *ST* I, q. 43, a. 3, resp.

⁴² *ST* I, q. 43, aa. 5, 7.

⁴³ *ST* I-II, q. 63, a. 3.

⁴⁴ *ST* I, q. 13, a. 9, obj. 1; I-II, q. 62, a. 1, sc and resp.; *Summa contra gentiles* IV, ch. 4.

⁴⁵ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

⁴⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 1, resp.

So there we have the abstract description of the central dynamic, but what does this transformed life look like? How does the solution to the *aporia* of the gift show up in the world? Here we have to turn to the moral teaching of Jesus, which can indeed be construed as a series of commands, but commands given not to the natural person, but to the one who has been supernaturalized, the one to whom Jesus can reasonably say, “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). The new life that Jesus urges—indeed that he makes possible—is one of absolutely radical gift-giving. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:43–44). In the ordinary dispensation, one loves those to whom he is already connected and therefore from whom he can expect some sort of compensation, emotional or otherwise; but in the new dispensation, love must be given precisely to those who will not return the favor. Jesus makes the principle eminently clear: “For if you love those who love you, what recompense do you have?” (Matt 5:46a).

In Jesus’s Sermon on the Plain recounted in the Gospel of Luke, we find something similar: “For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? . . . If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, and get back the same amount. But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back” (Luke 6:32–35a). In doing so, you will indeed be like your heavenly Father, “who makes his sun rise on the bad and the good” (Matt 5:45). And to give just one more example of the principle, we have this from the fourteenth chapter of Luke: “Then he said to the host who had invited him, ‘When you give a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. But when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you’” (Luke 14:12–14a). This is the undoing of the *hostis*—hospitality problem raised by Benveniste⁴⁷ and the dissolving of the *Gift*—gift dilemma presented by Derrida.⁴⁸ What cuts the Gordian knot is nothing other than the grace—the gift-giving capacity—of the one who cannot even in principle be repaid.

⁴⁷ Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, 46–47, 61, 66–67, 70–71.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (New York: Continuum, 1981), 180.

Conclusion

In a way, the dilemma of the gift is a particularly eloquent way of expressing the spiritual struggle at the heart of every person in our finite, fallen, and conflictual world. On the one hand, we want to give, for giving is the nature of God, and consciously or not, we are all striving for union with God. But on the other hand, we cannot give, for we are, as Derrida and company have correctly intuited, caught in the grip of the economic exchange. What becomes clear is that the *aporia* of the gift is not merely an intellectual conundrum, but a spiritual predicament.

Thomas's technical descriptions of God, creation, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit clarify the mind to be sure; but they also, and more importantly, liberate the captive soul. What the postmodern thinkers considered an obstacle to religious belief in point of fact functions as a particularly radiant light, to illuminate the Christian mystery. N.V