

What If?

What if what-is is a gift?

Acknowledging but bracketing the originality and utility of Cartesian doubt, one thing we know with any certainty is that creation is a *given*: It is there; we belong to a matrix of beings. However, when we move from the self-evident observation “the world is a given” to the proposition “the world is a *gift*,” we participate in a leap of faith. We move beyond the obvious and enter the speculative. When we consider “creation-as-gift,” we must be aware of the “as.” What does an awareness of the “as” entail? We need to concede and confirm that the supposition (world-as-gift) cannot be reduced to a self-evident axiom (world-as-given): The “is” and the “as” make a world of difference. We can be certain that “creation is a given” but we should also acknowledge that the possibility of the given world being a gift is precisely that: a *possibility*. Its “what-ifness” and “as-ifness” need to be recognized as such. After all, can it be demonstrated—or disproved—that creation is indeed a gift? Neither philosophy nor science nor theology can provide convincing proof or counterproof when faced with this proposition. It remains an open question (for the time being).

The acknowledgment of possibility (the context and counterpart of actuality) goes hand-in-hand with the recognition of undecidability (the context and counterpart of decision). Why must undecidability be allowed to play in the following work? Undecidability is neither indeterminacy nor indecision; it is the context within which religious, theological, and any other kind of decision takes place. Undecidability creates the space for faith, and a recognition and understanding of undecidability allows for a recognition and self-understanding of faith *as* faith. John D. Caputo assures us that “undecidability does not mean the apathy of indecision but the passion of faith,” faith being “a decision made in the midst of undecidability.”¹ Could *faith* be anything else?

Undecidability is therefore not against belief—far from it. And dogmatism would play no part in a faith that recognizes itself as such—and plays no part in the present faith-filled study. There is no question here of choosing or privileging either undecidability or decision, even if undecidability is the con-

text of decision. We are insisting here on decision's "other" rather than denying the significance of decision. To be sure, it is not a question of deciding between the one (decision) and the other (undecidability). It is a matter of acknowledging and embracing both. Undecidability should therefore be recognized, accepted, affirmed—and never forgotten—as a condition of possibility for belief and decision.

The undecidability in the presupposition "creation is a gift" should therefore be foregrounded in order to ensure that the following venture in thinking remains as rigorous and honest and self-vigilant as possible. To employ terms the ecotheologian Sallie McFague utilizes to describe her own self-reflexive book, *The Body of God*, the following work is "a wager, proposition, or experiment to investigate."² Without a recognition that decision takes place in a context of undecidability, the present work would risk sliding into dogmatism, for hubris may be figured as the ignorance or forgetfulness of undecidability. On the contrary, the present investigation recognizes its experimental dimension, persistently dwelling within the decision/undecidability dynamic. Remaining faithful to the logic or vocabulary of the what-if and as-if, what is constantly maintained is that the decision to perceive creation as a gift occurs in the context of uncertainty. This work and gamble is therefore mediated by the possible, the undecidable, the provisional.³

Acknowledging and incorporating the play of undecidability, I propose that the figuration of creation as a gift is one way of ecologically interpreting and interacting with the world. McFague makes the same point about her metaphor for creation as God's body: Her study "attempts to look at everything through one lens. . . . The model of the universe as God's body does not see nor does it allow us to say everything."⁴ For the present work, the lens of "the gift" is acknowledged as *one* of several interpretive models of perceiving creation. This wager and exploration can only retain its character of a work based on the what-if and as-if *if and only if* its experimental and hermeneutical nature is constantly and consistently recognized, accepted, and affirmed—otherwise speculation would feign certitude.

Now, an associated assumption drives this work: Not only is creation considered a gift, but the gift is identified as an *aporia*, and, by association, creation is itself figured as aporetic. I will discuss the question of the gift-aporia in due course, but I will begin by noting here a few introductory remarks regarding aporias per se. So, what is an aporia? To begin with, *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* defines *aporos* as: "without passage, and so of places, impassable, trackless" and *aporia* as: "of places, difficulty of passing; . . . of questions, a difficulty."⁵ "Aporia" therefore implies an experience of impassability: that which resists

passing-through. The term has taken on a specifically theoretical denotation, coming to mean a contradiction in a text or theory. An aporia is, in other words, a puzzle, a paradox.

An acknowledgment of the aporia's impassability or tension therefore induces a certain paralysis: How to get out? Without being preemptive, we may nevertheless propose that this immobility is (or, may turn out to be) a good thing. How so? Beginning on the etymological level, it is interesting to note that the current popular meaning of "paralysis" reverses its original Greek designation, where *paraluō* referred to loosening from the side, detaching, undoing, setting free. "Paralysis" can therefore signal both a hardening and a loosening. Like paralysis in its doubled sense, "aporeticity" (the aporetic quality of something) is a paralysis which nevertheless opens up the possibility for a certain passage. With specific reference to the gift, Caputo invites us "to be paralyzed by this aporia and then to make a move (when it is impossible)."⁶ Aporeticity may therefore be a condition of possibility for moving or passing through. Robyn Horner articulates the nature of this decisive move: "An aporia, by definition, cannot be solved, but only resolved by a decision to act in a particular way, to act *as if* there were a way forward."⁷

As the present meditation moves along, I, too, will speak of a certain paralysis-and-movement, but in somewhat different terms. What may be affirmed here is that the disjunctive nature of an aporia does not necessarily entail political, ethical, religious, or philosophical impasse or paralysis: This double movement—or, more accurately, *stasis*-and-movement—is akin to undecidability and decision, uncertainty and belief, *theoria* and *praxis*, deconstruction and reconstruction. Both impasse and passage are conditions of possibility for each other.

And so, the present "aporetics" (the study of aporias) emphasizes those facets of thinking that seem to have been forgotten, denied, and even demonized by (at least) Western philosophical and theological discourses: possibility, undecidability, aporeticity, etc. In light of my emphasis on these somewhat neglected facets, a risk arises: Will this aporetics be misconstrued as "yet another" display of postmodern posturing or obscurantism that would effectively—and irresponsibly—downplay the ecological crisis? This risk and possibility ensues *if and only if* we assume that nuanced, provisional discourse is automatically associated with impotent thinking. One cannot deny that one always faces the risk of a paralyzing self-vigilance. After the development of all that is excessive or hubristic in Western thought, it is little wonder that radical thinking (including feminism, deconstruction, ecology, phenomenology, etc.)—whose insights guide this work in all kinds of explicit and implicit ways—is keen to expose the dubi-

ous developments of human reason and continually demonstrate the exaggerations, limitations, and paradoxes of thought. But one should not thereby deduce that critical and self-conscious thinking could not be constructive or prescriptive. What is required is the delineation of constructive paths in nuanced and cautious ways. Let us therefore pursue a thinking that proceeds prudently with a concomitant *praxis*. As I hope to show, a self-vigilant aporetic needn't be ethico-politically ineffective.

The requirement that the present work may contribute to a radically ecological sensibility is not only motivated by a desire for rigorous (and passionate) thinking, but equally (or perhaps primarily) by an awareness of the severe ecological violence committed by us humans. The present work is not a denial (subtle or otherwise) of the ecological crisis but a passionate response to it. This study responds to—is responsible to—the disturbing state of creation.

As the empirical data amply illustrate, the phenomenon of creation's deterioration has rightly become an increasingly urgent and fundamental one.⁸ Although some academics and industrialists may erroneously and irresponsibly attempt to ignore or downplay the crisis, it is, nevertheless, a *crisis*—perhaps *the* crisis of our time and of the time to come. While valid in its identification of the statistical exaggeration of several environmental thinkers—no doubt motivated by the noble intention of saving creation—a text like Bjørn Lomborg's attention-grabbing *The Skeptical Environmentalist* combines, among several things, a gross andro-anthropocentrism with a severe scientism—and is thereby terribly irresponsible.⁹

My investigation attempts to contribute to “the” ecological movement (no doubt, multifarious—hence the quotation marks), whose tasks include alerting humanity to its terrible perception and mistreatment of the planet. The “why” of this study is therefore linked to the desire to contribute to this most urgent of tasks—the task of thinking and acting ecologically, of thinking and acting in ways that are more sensitive toward other-than-human others, other humans, and our selves. Hence, as “theoretical” or “abstract” as this discourse may be, it is “nevertheless” intended as an unequivocally eco-affirmative text, an intention motivated by the notion that ortho-*skepsis* leads to ortho-*praxis*.

Derrida's Gift

And so, acknowledging and affirming the roles of possibility, undecidability, and aporeticity in this work, the guiding question of this study is: What would it mean if creation is a gift—or at least perceived or conceived as such? Before

asking what is denoted by the term “creation” in the present context, how is “gift” defined and developed here, for the former (creation) is here being figured in terms of the latter (gift)? Why is the gift itself an aporia and a problem?

To begin with, I adopt the everyday (Western) definition of gifting: In Horner’s words (and drawing on Jacques Derrida’s work in this area), it occurs when “someone freely gives something to someone.”¹⁰ The qualifier “Western” signifies an openness to Ken Lokensgard’s contention that “Derrida’s definition applies for only a limited number of people in today’s world”—though one wonders how any other definition of “gift” could differentiate its meaning from words like “commodity” or “exchange.”¹¹ On the face of it, this practice doesn’t pose a problem. But can a gift be freely given? Horner concisely sums up the two crucial aspects of the gift and the concomitant dilemma: “Freedom and presence are the conditions of the gift as we know it. . . . Now, if the gift is present—that is, if it can be identified as such—then the gift is no longer gift but commodity, value, measure, or status symbol.”¹² It should be noted that, for reasons that will become clear as I proceed, the term “freedom and presence” stands for two clusters of concepts: The former, “freedom,” also stands for excess, gratuity, the unconditional, and so on; the latter, “identification,” also refers to exchange, gratitude, the conditional, etc.¹³ However, for ecological reasons that also will become clearer in due course, I usually utilize polarities like “excess/exchange” and “gratuity/gratitude” to denote the gift’s two basic elements.

Now, as Horner rightly observes, it turns out that the idea or definition of the gift “never seems to accord with its practical reality.”¹⁴ The gift’s aporetic nature is starkly posed in Derrida’s *Given Time*, the present meditation’s most determinative text (for Derrida engages the question of the gift from his earliest works). *Given Time* discloses the paradoxicality of the gift: “For there to be gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt.”¹⁵ And yet, the gift is marked by gratuity and its other. An aporia, indeed.

Exchange, which lays bare the gift’s irreducible aporeticity and thereby confounds the idea of an absolutely unconditional or “pure” gift, marks all three aspects of gift-giving: giver, gift, and recipient. To begin with, the giver receives something in return, be it another gift, gratitude, self-congratulation, or even hostility—for even displeasure or rejection gives something back to the gift-giver: the reinforcement of the giver’s identity.¹⁶ On the part of the recipient, the mere recognition of the gift is enough to bring it into circularity. The gift may lead to a counter-gift or a sense of indebtedness. Even indifference (for instance, apathy toward the gift) is simply a subtler gifting-back. The gift-thing itself likewise does not escape circular economy. (I qualify the word “economy”—which means the law, *nomos*, of the house, *oikos*—with “circular” because the

former term does not necessarily or exclusively entail exchange; for example, Georges Bataille's notion of "general economy" exceeds the circularity of "restricted [exchange] economy."¹⁷

Now, whether the gift is a thing, an intention, a value, or a symbol, it is nevertheless *identified* as a gift and this recognition brings it into the circle of reciprocity. If the gift is not identified as such, then it would perhaps escape exchange economy—remain *aneconomic*—but then it would no longer be phenomenally recognized as such. The conditions that therefore make gifting possible simultaneously make gifting (*the*) impossible.¹⁸

What is the significance of the gift-aporia for the question of subjectivity? Derrida argues that the "subject" and "object" are concepts and phenomena that reinforce the gift's economic status. Pure gifting would occur outside, beyond, or before subjectivity: "If there is gift, the *given* of the gift . . . must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor)" and "if there is gift, it cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects, things, or symbols." For Derrida, "the subject and the object are arrested affects of the gift."¹⁹ So what does the gift's excess or prior-ity—expressing "prior-ity" with a hyphen emphasizes the gift's precedence or immemoriality rather than insinuating any kind of primacy or superiority—mean in terms of intentionality? Insofar as the gift requires recognition, intention plays an indispensable role. ("It's the thought that *counts*.") It seems that intentionality annuls the gift of its giftness—or at least its linearity. However, the paradox of the gift weds the intentional with its other. First, why is the gift other-than-intentional? It happens as an event: It is "unforeseeable," "irruptive," "disinterested," "unexplainable by a system of efficient causes."²⁰ The gift-event brings "into relation luck, chance, the aleatory, *tukhē* [luck/fortune], with the freedom of the dice, with the donor's gift throw." However, this is only half the story; Derrida cautions that, in order to have gifting, there must be intentionality: "Effects of pure chance will never form a gift. . . . There is no gift without the intention of giving." Derrida gets to the heart of this particular paradox: "There must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or disorder, and there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must—miraculously, graciously—agree with each other." In other words, the gift is "both-and": It is marked by both intentionality and its other.

Now, Derrida's *Given Time* has not lost its force or irritation. As rigorous and persuasive as it is, the analysis is confronting and annoying: Who wants to concede that the gift is a problem? That its conditions are irreducibly contradictory? But as Horner's articulation makes clear, the argument's validity is evidenced in our everyday encounters: Our experiences of gifting are tied to exchange; we do not participate in a purely gratuitous gifting.²¹ The theologian

Stephen H. Webb rightly observes: “Everybody seems to know that giving is calculated, not spontaneous, and structured (and thereby canceled) by the expectation of an equivalent return.”²²

Derrida’s analysis is as “restrained” as it is confronting: His discourse is generously littered with nuances. Regarding the question of circularity and its effect on gifting, Derrida provides a two-way qualification: He argues that he is against neither exchange nor gifting in any simple or hyper-idealistic sense. He stresses: “One should not necessarily flee or condemn circularity as one would . . . a vicious circle. . . . One must, in a *certain way* of course, inhabit the circle, turn around in it, live there a feast of thinking, and the gift, the gift of thinking, would be no stranger there.”²³ According to this statement, Derrida registers the place of circularity; while he loves excess, he responsibly responds to the gift’s paradoxicality by resisting the temptation to deny or devalue exchange simplistically. And so, *Given Time* insightfully emphasizes the aporetic nature of the gift vis-à-vis gratuity’s gracious and miraculous co-implication with commerce.

Furthermore, Derrida constantly qualifies the possibility of the gift with the phrase “if there is any.”²⁴ The logic of the “if” and familial concepts (“as if,” “perhaps,” “maybe,” etc.) steadfastly mark *Given Time*. His approach to the question of the gift is obviously inscribed by a necessary uncertainty and perplexity—aporias provoke nothing less.²⁵ This hesitation is most profoundly acknowledged in the following remark (which takes place in the context of a discussion about gifting and subjectivity): “If the gift is annulled in the economic odyssey of the circle as soon as it appears *as gift* or as soon as it signifies *itself as gift*, there is no longer any ‘logic of the gift,’ and one may safely say that a consistent discourse on the gift becomes impossible.”²⁶ Note how this statement is prefaced by an “if” and constantly qualified by the “as”—and the emphases are not added. Note, too, that this statement is offered early on in the text: Derrida recognizes that discussions on the gift are necessarily inconsistent—an inconsistency structured by the “madness” involved in gifting and its thinking.

The present aporetics acknowledges and affirms this madness. But why should one confirm and affirm this inability to speak consistently about the gift? As provocative as it sounds, this “inadequacy” is a good thing: *By definition*, any discourse on whatever is aporetic and mysterious ultimately fails to secure its subject matter. Derrida explicitly states that the gift has a “mysterious and elusive character.”²⁷ The mysterious ultimately eludes the gaze and grasp of epistemic mastery—something we moderns (and not just us) keep forgetting, keep suppressing. Derrida avoids here any pretension to totality, as well as any pretension to an absolute apophatism (negativity, unknowing) and its concomitant silence: After all, he writes about the gift.²⁸ He displays an awareness of the ultimate inconsistency involved in thinking gifting, and this kind of awareness