

Contributions To Phenomenology 85

Jason W. Alvis

Marion and Derrida on The Gift and Desire: Debating the Generosity of Things

 Springer

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Histories of the Gift and Desire

Abstract This chapter provides a brief historical backdrop to both topics of “the gift” and “desire” especially in French philosophy in the twentieth century, and initiates an engagement on thinking how the two topics can be thought simultaneously in order to ultimately shed further light on the distinctions between deconstructive phenomenology, and “classical” phenomenology. Here, the basic claims of the book are proposed. Derrida rejects desire from playing a role in any “happening” or “event” of the gift, most especially because desire is an economically appropriated concept, which is antithetical to the aneconomical gift that he claims to be essential to deconstruction. Instead, the gift must remain “impossible.” Whereas for Marion, intentionality is distinct from desire, which is of great interest to him and can play a number of roles in his approach to the gift, the *adonné*, and givenness. Thus, Marion’s phenomenology marks a unique union between gift and desire. Such an argument allows for a more detailed understanding of the differences between Derrida’s deconstruction and Marion’s phenomenology.

Love, in the genuine sense, is one of the chief problems of phenomenology. –Husserl¹

What does it mean: ‘given,’ ‘givenness,’ this magical word for phenomenology and the ‘stumbling block’ for all the others? –Heidegger²

There is a party line along which phenomenologists today tend to be divided. On one side of this line are those favorable to Derrida’s cause of deconstruction; those who strip (at times uncarefully and unknowingly) from phenomenology its most vital and basic tools for another, multi-disciplinary agenda. While on the other side

¹Edmund Husserl, quoted in James Hart, *Who One Is* (Dordrecht Netherlands: Springer Press, 2009), p. 264, note 27. From Edmund Husserl’s *Nachlass MS*, E III 2, 36b; transcription, p. 61. Hart translates the continuation of this passage as follows: “And that holds not merely in the abstract particularity and individuality but as a universal problem. It is a problem in its intentional foundational sources as well as in its concealed forms – a problem of a driving intentionality that makes itself felt in the depths and in the heights and in the universal expanses of intentionality.”

²“Was heißt ‘gegeben’, ‘Gegebenheit’-dieses Zauberwort der Phinomenologie und der ‘Stein des Anstoßes’ bei den anderen?” Martin Heidegger, *Grundprobleme Phanomenologie* (1919/20), ed. Hans-Helmuth Gander in *Gesamtausgabe* 58 (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann 1993), p. 5.

of this line are those unsympathetic to the Derridean cause; those who toil according to the rules of classical (read: Husserlian) phenomenology in all its “scientific” rigor. Some phenomenologists reject deconstruction in order to get back to the possibilities of knowing “the things in themselves,” while others embrace it as the condition of hermeneutic awareness required by all good philosophy.

Of course, this is a hyperbolic caricature. Yet it serves as a reminder that deconstruction is not simply an oddly aberrant, unrestrained thought within the phenomenological tradition, but is also representative of an important, widely followed rupture within – especially French – phenomenology itself. The first step in understanding better this disjunction within the field would involve locating and unfolding specialized encounters on topics relevant to it. One debate that fits such criteria has thus far gone largely overlooked for any import it might have for phenomenology and has been, for better or worse, archived in intellectual history for its inauguratory role in the formation of the burgeoning subfield “continental philosophy of religion.”³ This debate was on “the gift” between Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida. It’s value for phenomenology often has been overshadowed, however, by the so-called “return of religion,” a *revenir* that began with Derrida’s deconstruction, alongside the – often pejoratively named – “Theological Turn,” a *tournant* in French Phenomenology spearheaded by Marion.⁴ Such turnings and returnings of religion, to theology, from theology, to religion, indeed have led to effectual, interdisciplinary, and critical application of both phenomenology and deconstruction, especially after Heidegger’s critiques of “ontotheology” in metaphysics.⁵ Thus, the value Marion and Derrida’s debate on the gift might have for phenomenology has

³Though it existed long before this time, “Continental Philosophy of Religion” gained a formal beginning with John D. Caputo’s 1997 *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. For Smith, in regards to this field, “One could identify the rumbling of this thirty years ago in Jean-Luc Marion’s landmark work, *L’idole et la distance* (1977) or in the earlier and influential work of Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas. In fact, elements of such “continental” (or more specifically, phenomenological) engagements with religious phenomena can already be seen in Husserl and Heidegger. In North America, this continental impetus has generated a lively discourse and secondary literature.” And Smith continues, “...such discourse had already been sustained in the work of Robert Sokolowski, Merold Westphal, Carl Raschke, Adriaan Peperzaak, Mark Taylor and others.” James K. A. Smith, “Continental Philosophy of Religion: Prescriptions for a Healthy Subdiscipline”, *Faith and Philosophy*, 26: 4 (2009): 440. Of those attempts in North America, Perhaps the first can be found as early as *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), a collection essays from Altizer, Raschke, et al.

⁴Heidegger is often conceived to be among the first to bring Phenomenology’s distinctive style to Religious and Theological discourses. Merold Westphal claims that the field’s launch pad is Heidegger’s essay “Phenomenology and Theology.” Marion has concerns with Heidegger’s description of the relationship between phenomenology and theology, for it leaves Phenomenology in control over theology. See Jean-Luc Marion, “On the Gift” in *God, The Gift and Postmodernism*. eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon. (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 69. See also Hent de Vries’ chapter on Marion’s “heterology of donation” in *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

⁵Though the term “onto-theology” has been hyphenated differently, even within the corpus of one thinker (e.g. onto-theo-logy, onto-theology, ontotheology) it’s meaning does not change in either Marion or Derrida’s corpus.

remained yet to be disclosed. Further, since both thinkers pose themselves as representatives of their respective methodologies (phenomenology and deconstruction), their debates on the gift may hold at least one key to understanding the limits of deconstruction, whether or not deconstruction truly has supplied warrant for abandoning classical phenomenology, and the particular distinctions between these two often overlapping approaches. This book addresses two particular themes that aid in further understanding and clarifying the differences between Marion's phenomenology and Derrida's deconstruction: the gift and desire.⁶ The gift or "Givenness" is according to Heidegger the basis of the self-appearance of things and thus the "magic word for phenomenology," and love, which is similar to desire in a manifold of ways, is claimed by Husserl to be "one of the chief problems of phenomenology."⁷ To what degree should these two claims about phenomenology be taken seriously in their own right, and is it possible to address them both simultaneously in a way that allows further insight into this field of thinking?

1.1 Brief History of the Gift in Phenomenology and French Thought

In general, the word "gift" has a rich and manifold history. The Proto-Indo-European roots of the word lead back to *ghabh*, which refers to both giving *and* taking, and was manifested in the Mittelhochdeutsch word for a dowry, *mitgift*. The French *donner* (to give) has its roots in the Hittite words *dô* (give) and *dâ* (take), and similarly the French *cadeau* (gift) originates in the idea of the *catena* (chain), which gestures to "gift" as a means of strengthening the social bond. Naturally, the features of these etymologies that emphasize taking, chaining, and committing eventually led to a number of concerns over how "the gift" may imply a kind of relationship with economy (*oikos*) or exchange while still remaining free from being reduced to economy. To what extent, if any, might "giving" also amount to "taking?" Is there a possibility of a "pure" gift that is free from elements of exchange and trade?

These questions were not yet raised in the early stages of the phenomenological tradition, in which Husserl initiated thinking on the gift in terms of "givenness" (*Gegebenheit*), which simply signals to the way in which phenomena come into appearance and become present to consciousness. As the study of appearance (*Phainesthai, erscheinen*), phenomenology is trained on the modes of variation that

⁶As Sebbah recently asserted, "the question of the gift, posited as the question of givenness, is phenomenology's grounding question." François-David Sebbah, *Testing the Limit: Derrida, Henry, Levinas, and the Phenomenological Tradition* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 98.

⁷Edmund Husserl, quoted in James Hart, *Who One Is*. (Dordrecht Netherlands: Springer Press, 2009), note 27. P. 264. From Edmund Husserl's *Nachlass MS*, E III 2, 36b; transcription, p. 61. Martin Heidegger, *Grundprobleme Phanomenologie* (1919/20), ed. Hans-Helmuth Gander in *Gesamtausgabe* 58 (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann 1993), p. 5.