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Symbolic Exchange and the Gift: Louis-Marie Chauvet and Jacques Derrida in Dialogue

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Introduction

The concept of the gift fascinates many authors from a variety of traditions, and not always for similar reasons. Differing hermeneutics give rise to different visions of this basic experience of humanity—the concept of the gift—and allow for differing articulations both of its essential form, and its very possibility or impossibility. This project sets in dialogue two authors whose work touches significantly on formulations of the gift: Louis-Marie Chauvet and Jacques Derrida. After briefly outlining each author's approach to the gift (specifically its form and possibility, or lack thereof), the discussion moves to comparing and contrasting their approaches. The project finishes by arguing that Chauvet constructs a specific nuance in his concept of the gift/symbol that is absent in Derrida—and that Derrida would not agree with—and suggests that at least one reason for this difference is the differing hermeneutics with which each author approaches the subject matter.

Louis-Marie Chauvet

For Chauvet, the importance of the concept of the gift derives from the place it holds in the divine-human relationship. This is not to say that Chauvet lacks a conception of human-to-human giving, but rather to say that his work is concentrated primarily in the area of Christian sacraments and liturgy, which means for him that the origins of the gift are in God. In order to understand Chauvet's trajectory, this section of the discussion briefly explores one main avenue in his thought, that of "symbolic exchange," as well as the concepts that undergird it and spring from it.

In order to approach Chauvet's concept of symbolic exchange, it is important to take a cursory glance at what Chauvet means by "symbolic,"

or how he conceives of "symbol."¹ For Chauvet, symbol is one of two methods of human communication, the other being "sign."² These two levels of communication, while ultimately inseparable from one another, comprise quite different ways of speaking about reality. Chauvet is careful never to absolutely separate the levels of sign and symbol from one another (for him they are always intertwined),³ but in the interest of conciseness this discussion intentionally leaves that nuance largely by the wayside. When Chauvet speaks of signs, he means the use of things in order to allow language to convey ideas at something approaching face value. A sign represents something—an idea, an object, an entity—in a way that keeps that something at arm's length; the sign is a method of simple discourse.

The symbol on the other hand, is for Chauvet the locus of a *mediation* of reality, rather than a signification of it. While a sign points its recipient to the thing signified, the symbol bears the reality of the thing symbolized *to* the recipient. In an example Chauvet uses to tease this difference out, he speaks of two uses of the word "flower," one as a sign and one as a symbol.⁴ If the word flower is used in a conversation between people discussing horticulture, it simply signifies the concept of flowers in order to exchange information between the two participants. It *signifies* what the two are speaking of. On the other hand, if a person is lost and alone in a strange place and hears someone

¹ A full explanation of Chauvet's theology of symbol runs far beyond the scope of the current discussion. As this is the case, the discussion limits itself to only those aspects of Chauvet's theology of symbol that directly bear on the gift.

² Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 74-75.

³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

say, “flower,” the person is not immediately drawn into a conversation of horticulture, but rather into the realization that he or she is not alone, and that there is someone near who speaks a common language. The word flower has symbolized the nearness of a person who may help, or at least someone with whom the lost person can speak. Flower, in this case, has symbolized the reality of the situation and the other person—it has become a mediation.

The importance of the distinction between symbol and sign in Chauvet’s thought (at least as it relates to the gift) is that the sign belongs to the world and logic of value/business exchange, while the symbol belongs to the world and logic of gift exchange.⁵ That there is indeed some kind of difference between these two logics is something Chauvet seems to take for granted (he cites Marcel Mauss’s seminal work *The Gift* and assumes Mauss makes a good case therein),⁶ but before exploring the validity of this assumption, it would be prudent to point out the implications Chauvet draws from this distinction.

First, Chauvet argues, since the symbol is within the logic of gift-exchange, and since it is a bearer of reality rather than simply a referential tool, the value of the symbolic object itself is of no concern.⁷ Instead, what is important in the symbol is its ability to mediate the reality it symbolizes. The symbol bears some reality to a recipient; it mediates the *identity* of its giver in order to precipitate *recognition* on the part of the receiver.⁸ This is not the same as a sign pointing to some object to be recognized. The symbol bears a *whom* who is to be recognized by the recipient. Both the sign and the symbol are given from someone to someone else, but in exchanging a sign it is the *what* that matters; in giving a symbol what matters is the *who* who is given *to whom*. In this light, the symbol in Chauvet might be said to be inexhaustibly subjective—the symbol bears the reality of the giver in order to make recognition possible in the receiver. Simply put, symbols are self-communication. They allow

one subject to communicate him- or herself to another subject.⁹

Second, reception of a symbol requires some degree of participation on the part of the receiver—it is never an objective reception. In the exchange of a sign, one might imagine two essentially disinterested parties transferring some knowledge or object from one to the other, and subsequently continuing on their respective ways unchanged. This is because in signs the *what* is important—I might give someone a certain something, and it is the transfer of that *thing* that might be essential. However if, when I give that something to someone, what is important is instead the relationship that *I* am forging with *him or her*, I have largely exited the world of sign and entered the symbolic. This means, since it is a relationship that is at stake, the only possible way to receive the something is actively—that is, for the receiver to take some *action* with regard to the thing, the giver, and the receiver him- or herself.

All this is to say that symbolic exchange—i.e. the gift—requires *in its reception* a return-gift. In Chauvet’s words, “there is ‘reception’ (of the gift as gift) only by the obligatory implication of a return-gift. In other words, the return-gift is the mark of reception.”¹⁰ In symbolic exchange, there can be no discrete chronological (or even just *logical*) steps of receiving and then responding. Rather, receiving and responding are simultaneous actions of the full predicate of symbolic exchange. Since the symbol mediates one subject to the other, the *relationship*—necessarily a dynamic concept—is altered, so reception as dynamic is the only possibility. Reception and return-gift cannot play out as act and response. The gift is only received by virtue of the return-gift.

To be fair, there is a specific *telos* Chauvet has in mind when he forges this construction of symbol and the gift (a hermeneutic about which he is forthcoming and unapologetic): Christian life/ethics and liturgy. For him, the whole point of speaking of symbol and the gift at all is to understand more fully the giver *par excellence*: God in Christ, made present in the sacraments, especially at the Eucharist. In order to more fully apprehend Chauvet’s conception of the gift and symbol, this section concludes with a brief look at how he sees them playing out in Christianity.

⁵ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Re-interpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, SJ, and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 102-107.

⁶ See for example his discussion of Mauss (Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 100-102). C.f. also Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990).

⁷ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 84.

⁸ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 74; *Symbol and Sacrament*, 112.

⁹ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 119.

¹⁰ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 122.

The first immediately apparent point is that for Chauvet, since the symbol is a mediation of one self to another, that which is mediated in the Christian imagination is the reality of God's love as grace. For Chauvet, God initiates the gift of grace as exactly that—gratuitous giving, without provocation—and gives it in a character of graciousness, that is, in a character of being beyond price or appraisal.¹¹ What is given in grace, if it can be called anything, is the love of God for us, and as such it is characterized by gratuitousness (in that it is free and undeserved) and graciousness (in that it is outside of price, “beyond the useful and the useless”).¹² The grace of God is not for Chauvet a *thing* transferred; rather it is a *reality mediated*. It cannot be signified—it can only be symbolized.

This last is the reason Chauvet is so keen on a theology of the sacraments. For him, the mediation of grace takes place through the symbols of the sacraments—especially the Eucharist.¹³ Since we are bodily creatures, the only ways in which we can appropriate any measure of reality are bodily ways.¹⁴ Symbols allow that which is not essentially bodily to be mediated to those who essentially are. In the Eucharist, the reality of God's grace—in Jesus Christ—becomes present in the bread and wine, which in turn mediate that reality to the gathered Christian community. The gift is given as a symbol, which is to say (for Chauvet), in the most real way possible.

While God does give grace freely in the Eucharist, recall that for Chauvet, reception of the gift is predicated only by the recipients' return-gift. In this way Chauvet is able to link the celebration of the Eucharist immediately to Christian ethics. It might be easy at this point to reify grace and action in Chauvet's vision, arguing that God gives us something in the Eucharist, and we in turn must repay God by giving things to others. However, such would be a misreading of the thrust of Chauvet's argument. In his conception, the graciousness of God's gift in the Eucharist (that which puts it

outside economic calculation) is essential also to the return-gift of the human recipients.¹⁵ Humans cannot repay that which is outside of value. They cannot give back in either want or excess—they can only *respond* in kind or out of kind. Receiving grace as the act of God (or, as Godself) is inseparable from giving oneself back as a subject through whom grace can continue to be given.¹⁶ Christians only successfully receive the Eucharist when they respond with the love of neighbor, which is mediated through bodily acts of charity/ethics (and likewise, if Christians respond without love of neighbor, God's gift of grace has been frustrated). God's grace in this way has been successfully mediated to Christians only when they respond with graciousness toward others. This is not calculation and repayment. This is reception *as* response; grace as gift necessarily proliferates itself, else it was never received at all.

Jacques Derrida

Unlike Chauvet, Derrida approaches the idea of the gift as anything but a given. For him, the gift is exactly what he calls “the impossible.”¹⁷ *Giving* is not necessarily impossible (though it is only in light of death that giving and taking are possible),¹⁸ but giving *a/the gift* is the impossible. As such, speaking of the gift for Derrida is always speaking of something that cannot be nailed down—it is an enigma. This section of the discussion briefly explores the specific kind of impossibility that Derrida sees in the gift, and moves subsequently on to explore what in his thought the gift (if there is any)¹⁹ might be, or what it must look like.

¹¹ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 108-109.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ One might be able to speak about God's grace outside the sacraments in the theology of Chauvet, but such a question runs beyond the scope of this discussion.

¹⁴ Chauvet's theology of the body is tied directly to that of language, symbol, and mediation. Too much detail is unwarranted here, but suffice it to say that Chauvet can even speak of the body as the “arch-symbol” mediating human reality (Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 151).

¹⁵ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 109.

¹⁶ Philippe Bordeyne, “The Ethical Horizon of Liturgy,” in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God: Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet*, eds. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2008), 130.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, 2nd ed., trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 45. The relation of the gift to death is a worthy topic in order to completely understand where Derrida is coming from with the concept of the gift. However, this discussion limits itself to a brief outline of Derrida's vision, and so will draw almost exclusively from his work *Given Time* rather than *The Gift of Death*.

¹⁹ Derrida often uses this phrase in qualifying the impossible. He does not want to presume anything about the gift, least of all its existence.

For Derrida, the gift is impossibility—“not impossible but *the* impossible.”²⁰ This distinction may seem slight, but understanding what Derrida means by it helps throw into sharper relief a good deal of what he does with the gift. There are certain things in the world that are simply impossible: palm trees do not grow in the tundra, it is impossible to see amoebas without a microscope, and people will never be wholly satisfied with whatever the current tax rate is. However, these impossible things are characterized by a specific *type* of impossibility, namely, they are impossible because some element in them is left wanting. Palm trees want for hardiness; if they could survive colder temperatures, perhaps they could indeed grow in the tundra. The human eye wants for keenness; if it were a good deal keener, we might be able to see amoebas without using microscopes. And of course, if taxes were just and humans were patient and charitable, perhaps we could be satisfied with the rate.

In each of these situations, want precipitates impossibility. However, one could imagine a world in which these things would not be impossible. The issues are *derivatively* impossible; if circumstances were different, they might indeed be possible. This is qualitatively different from the impossibility of the gift. For Derrida, the gift is *the* impossible, that is, the essence of what makes a gift also makes it impossible. This might be called *intrinsic* impossibility, and it also has its members: round squares, hot ice, vegetarian steaks, and other things that border on the absurd. These are trite examples, but they approximate where Derrida wants to go with the gift. *As gift*, the gift is impossibility. Its impossibility does not derive from anything lacking about the concept, the material, or the performance. Rather, it is the impossible precisely because those things that constitute it are—as a set—impossible. For Derrida, it is not want that makes the gift impossible; it is exactly the *purity* of the gift—the necessary purity—that qualitatively separates it from the realm of the possible.

The constitution of the gift in Derrida, i.e. the essential elements that precipitate the gift’s impossibility, might be thought of as threefold: (1) the structure of the gift, (2) the character of the gift, and (3) the matter of the gift.²¹ The first constitutive element of the gift, that of its structure, Der-

rida explains as deriving basically from convention: “some ‘one’ intends to give or gives ‘something’ to ‘someone other.’”²² For the gift to be a gift, there ought to be a giver, a gift, and a receiver—absence of any of these three components causes the gift to present itself to us as incomplete.²³ Derrida points out that this structure in the end amounts to a tautology; if we try to explain what the structure of the gift is, we immediately assume that our audience already has some “precomprehension” of the gift.²⁴ In his words, when I define the gift’s structure, “I suppose that I know and that you know what ‘to give,’ ‘gift,’ ‘donor,’ ‘donee,’ mean in our common language.”²⁵ This is the first constituent and also the first trouble with the gift—any attempt to apprehend its structure of giver-gift-receiver presupposes its definition in the explanation—but this does not, on its own, make the gift the impossible. For that, the other two constitutive elements are needed.

The second constitutive element of the gift, its character, is what ought to separate it from an economic exchange of goods or services: the gift must be gratuitous. As Derrida articulates, “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counterfeit, or debt.”²⁶ In essence, the gift must be free, in all senses of the term. On a certain level this character of the gift would be obvious, but Derrida takes a very hard stance on the purity of the gift’s gratuitousness. For him, *any* reciprocity for a gift given is tantamount to repayment (which nullifies the gift), *any* satisfaction or even giving intention on the part of the giver is the same as reimbursement (also nullifying the gift), and even any *recognition* of the gift or the giver on the part of the receiver is equal to compensation (which, of course, nullifies the gift as well).²⁷ The character of gratuitousness is itself the problematic—it does not on its own make the gift the impossible, but joining it to the structure and matter of the gift does.

The third constitutive element of the gift—its matter—has to do with its necessary dependence on systems of economy and value. While the gift

²⁰ Derrida, *Given Time*, 7.

²¹ Here I mean matter as body or material, not matter as issue or problem.

²² Derrida, *Given Time*, 11.

²³ This is not to say that each component must be recognized by the others; rather, the gift needs to have each of these three parts to be considered any kind of transfer at all.

²⁴ Derrida, *Given Time*, 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12, 13, 14, 16, 23.

must be gratuitous, the gift itself must have some value in order to qualify as a gift. What gift could be a gift if it were in no sense valuable, at least to some degree? Further, a gift's value is generally determined by an economy, whether it is of simple economy or of symbolic²⁸ value. This is what Derrida means when he says, "Now the gift, *if there is any*, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift ... without treating this relation to economy, even to the money economy."²⁹ The point for Derrida is that the gift is inseparable from value and economy on the one hand, but that on the other it *must* be in a way separated from value and economy. The circle of economic exchange is assumed by the gift, but it must remain foreign to the gift. In Derrida's words, "If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain *aneconomic*. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must *keep* a relation of foreignness to the circle."³⁰ If the gift touches economy, then it is no longer a gift, but if it is completely separated from economy, then likewise it is no longer a gift. Again, this on its own does not preclude the possibility of the gift, but when it is taken with the other two constitutive elements, the gift remains the impossible.

While Derrida goes to lengths to explain why the gift is the impossible, he nevertheless does not rule out the gift's reality. The structure, character, and matter of the gift preclude its possibility, but they do not undo the gift as gift. Derrida circumvents the inherent impossibility of the gift by arguing that the gift, if there is any, takes place only on the condition of forgetting.³¹ For Derrida, if the gift is recognized as what it is, it vanishes. Recognizing the gift as what it is would require seeing the structure, character, and matter all at the same time—and that is exactly what is impossible about the gift. The very constitution of the gift makes it the impossible, so recognition or remembrance of the gift jars it out of reality and hides it again in impossibility. Derrida does not argue that the gift is an impossible phenomenon; instead, he argues that it cannot present itself *as* a phenomenon, because as a phenomenon it is the impossible. In his words, "The gift *itself*—we dare not say the gift

in itself—will never be confused with the presence of its phenomenon."³² Therefore, for the gift to take place, it relies completely on the condition of forgetting—both the forgetting of the giver and the receiver.

On the part of the giver, recall that for Derrida the simple intention to give is enough to nullify the gift. The reason for this is that intention to give (to say nothing of actually giving) spontaneously creates in the giver a sense of self-satisfaction.³³ Since this is the case, the giver has *received* something in the act of giving, and so the gift's relation of foreignness to the circle of economic exchange has been compromised, and the gift vanishes. For Derrida, if there is *any* reception of *anything* in the act of giving, then the gift is nullified. He is not content to separate giving and receiving from each other if they are consequent upon the same action. For him, if giving and receiving are parts of a single action, then the gift is nullified. In this light, the giver must *forget* both the giving and the gift itself, and only then can the gift, as the impossible, take place.

The receiver's forgetting is not altogether different from the forgetting required of the giver. For Derrida, as soon as the receiver recognizes the gift (that is, recognizes him- or herself *as* a receiver), he or she is put under a feeling of obligation.³⁴ This feeling, whether intuited or made explicit, nullifies the gift. Derrida argues that the actual performance of receiving makes no difference as far as the integrity of the gift is concerned. For him, even if the intended receiver refuses the gift, the mere recognition that it was offered is enough to cause the gift to vanish.³⁵ On the one hand the giver—if he or she recognizes the gift—*receives* in some sense (which destroys the gift), and on the other the receiver—if he or she recognizes the gift—*gives* in some sense (whether giving thanks, feeling under obligation, or whatever), and such a fact causes the gift to fall back into impossibility. For Derrida, recognition of the gift, whether on the part of the giver or the receiver, nullifies it. The gift is the impossible—it might be real and concrete, but only if it is immediately *forgotten* as such.³⁶

²⁸ This use of *symbolic* is not the same as the term in Chauvet, but a discussion of that difference must wait just a bit.

²⁹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 7. Emphasis in original.

³⁰ Ibid. Emphases in original.

³¹ Ibid., 16-18.

³² Ibid., 29.

³³ Ibid., 23.

³⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁶ Derrida does mention that this *forgetting* cannot be a simple non-experience. The gift must be really experienced, but then

Chauvet and Derrida: A Conversation

A first point of conversation between Chauvet and Derrida must be the question of how blatantly (or not) the gift can present itself as such to observers and participants. Recall that Chauvet essentially takes Mauss at his word when he describes archaic societies that operate on an “economy” of gift exchange.³⁷ Derrida however, argues that “Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* speaks of everything but the gift: It deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift *and* counter-gift.”³⁸ For Derrida, the mere fact that the societies Mauss discusses can intimate obligation and reciprocity means that they are outside the realm of the gift. They do not give gifts, because there are always strings attached.

For Chauvet (as well as for Mauss), reciprocity and return-gift do not suffice to nullify gift giving. This is the first legitimate difference between Chauvet and Derrida as they approach the gift: Chauvet calls the gift what Derrida lumps in with economic exchange. To be fair, Chauvet is not unaware of what he is doing—he knows that necessary reciprocity or “obligatory generosity” might be terms that would set off the likes of Derrida, but he joins Mauss in saying “The terms which we have used—present, gift—are not in themselves completely exact. We find no others; this is the best we can do.”³⁹ However, Chauvet would not be content to concede that what he calls the gift is really just veiled market business. He holds that economic systems of gift exchange are “of a *completely different order* than that of the marketplace or of value.”⁴⁰ For Chauvet, while gift exchanges do not always (or, he might agree with Derrida in saying, *ever*) appear in the purity of satisfying the three constitutive elements of the Derridian concept of the gift, he also maintains that the gift as it appears is still qualitatively different than payment—reciprocity and attached strings included. Chauvet argues that the gift as it appears in phenomena is actually *symbolic* exchange, which separates it from market exchange.

completely forgotten as such. It must reveal itself, but in doing so immediately conceal itself again in the same instant. This is part of its impossibility (and one that runs beyond the scope of this discussion)—the gift is impossible because its necessary condition, immediate forgetting, defies time. (C.f. Derrida, *Given Time*, 17-22.)

³⁷ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 100-102.

³⁸ Derrida, *Given Time*, 24.

³⁹ Marcel Mauss, qtd. in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 101.

⁴⁰ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 100. Emphasis in original.

At this point, Chauvet’s insistence upon using the category of symbol—specifically as separate from categories of value and economy—produces a distinction that is foreign to Derrida. Derrida does not immediately appear to have a robust philosophy of the symbol. He does use the term, but seems to do so in a far more conventional than rigorous sense: symbol (or symbolic) for him connotes non-material objects, like gratification or satisfaction, that are generally “paid” to oneself if one does not forget the gift.⁴¹ Derrida does not attempt to conflate symbol and sign—for him the symbol surely bears a reality to the receiver—but he does equate the reality borne by the symbol with an object of economy. For him, it seems that non-material realities—satisfaction, gratitude, forgiveness, perhaps even love—amount qualitatively to the same thing as dollars and cents where the gift is concerned. They are forms of payment or repayment; they make the gift the impossible, rather than liberating it from economy.

The question becomes, is Chauvet right to distinguish the symbolic order from that of sign and economy? *Is* there a qualitative difference between symbols and the realities they bear on the one hand, and signs and the economies they represent on the other? One might find a partial answer to this question in the rationale Chauvet gives for distinguishing symbol and sign (i.e. gift and economy): for him, symbols do not simply bear satisfaction or gratitude. Symbols might represent those things, but they *bear* the reality of the giver to the receiver.⁴² This is a concept to which Derrida pays little if any attention. For Chauvet, when a gift is given, i.e. when a *symbolic exchange* is performed, the symbol mediates the reality of one entity to another. It is saturated not just with feelings or convictions; it is saturated with the *self* who gives. This may not satisfy the three elements of the gift that are necessary for Derrida, but it may still separate the symbol from market exchange. Selves cannot be paid one to another—for Chauvet they may be *mediated* symbolically, but that can only be a gift, not a market exchange.

Chauvet’s oft-repeated concept of grace mediated in the sacraments provides a good example of the difference Chauvet sees that Derrida does not. Recall that for Chauvet, God gives

⁴¹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 11, 14, 23.

⁴² Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 119.

Godself in the sacraments, being mediated through the physical symbols of the rituals, and humans respond by giving themselves symbolically through their own actions and gifts. It remains important that for Chauvet, Christians' reception and response constitute a single act—God gives, and Christians receive/respond. Christians do *not*, in Chauvet's view, receive and *then* respond. Given this construction, what happens in the sacraments—perhaps most explicitly in the Eucharist—is a symbolic exchange, that is, an actual exchange of gifts. Christians receive the Triune God, and give themselves to God and others.⁴³

Could Derrida see in this symbolic exchange something that is quite different from market exchange? It does not seem so. It would be an open question whether or not Derrida could assent to an idea of symbols in which they mediate the reality of those who give them, but regardless of whether he could or not, he would still argue that *exchange* can have nothing to do with the *gift*. Symbolic exchange, for Derrida, would eliminate the gift simply because it is an exchange. There is reciprocity; *ergo* there is no gift. There is return-gift; *ergo* the gift itself vanishes. Exchange for Derrida must remain alien to the gift.

In this light, there appear two main differences between Derrida and Chauvet with respect to symbol and the gift. First and perhaps more obviously, there is the difference in their definitions of the gift. Chauvet can speak of reciprocity in the gift because of his concept of symbol and mediation. Derrida would shun such an idea because the gift can admit of no reciprocity. While this may or may not be a complete impasse between the two figures, it brings to light the second difference:

The second difference that appears is one of hermeneutics. Chauvet, as he employs an explicitly Christian/sacramental hermeneutic, is able to speak of symbolic exchange and consequently the gift to a certain extent because revelation allows him to do so. God giving Godself by the mediation of the sacraments is a claim steeped in the Christian tradition nearly from the beginning. What Chauvet has done is reckoned with this from the standpoint of contemporary philosophy,⁴⁴ and has concluded

that *from the Christian standpoint*, gift and return-gift touch each other in the sacraments. Christians do not (because they *cannot*) repay God by their actions. Ethics as response to liturgy is actually ethics as *reception* in liturgy. This fact—that Christians do not give things back to God or others, but rather receive grace by giving *themselves* to others—is the insight that allows Chauvet to distinguish between symbolic (gift) exchange and market exchange. The distinction is not a simple product of his presuppositions, but his hermeneutical approach certainly does make the distinction possible.

Derrida, for his part, is dependant upon his hermeneutic just as much as Chauvet. This can be most easily seen in Derrida's starting point: the gift as the impossible. Without giving too much into cynicism, one can tentatively ask this: if Derrida *begins* with the assertion that the gift is an enigma, the impossible, then who could reasonably expect him to conclude anything else? Or, more directly, one must ask of Derrida *why* he can conceive of the gift as the impossible. Is it primarily because of his deductions and arguments? This of course might be so (just as Chauvet *might* have put together his vision of symbol and gift simply by reflecting on Christian rites and reflections), but is it likely? Would it not be equally likely to maintain that what *allows* Derrida to form his rather rigorous conception of the gift as the impossible is instead the fact that he does not share Chauvet's hermeneutic of Christianity? Derrida has little hermeneutical reason to defend the gift in symbol or sacrament (it is noteworthy that he is quite comfortable with the idea of infinite deferral of "the impossible," i.e. the gift that is essentially never given),⁴⁵ so he ends up with the gift as the impossible. Again, like Chauvet, this is not a *simple* product of his presuppositions, but his hermeneutical principles certainly make his conclusions possible.

scholastic, and even onto-theological approaches to sacraments and the symbol/gift. C.f. Lieven Boeve, "Theology in a Post-modern Context and the Hermeneutical Project of Louis-Marie Chauvet," in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God: Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet*, eds. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2008), 7-11.

⁴⁵ John D. Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 185-186.

⁴³ This of course is the ideal case. Chauvet describes a *vision* of symbols and sacraments—the fact that it does not play out always and everywhere does not invalidate the fact that it does play out sometimes and somewhere.

⁴⁴ A good deal of Chauvet's project is a critique of traditional

Conclusion

This discussion has argued that the main difference between Louis-Marie Chauvet and Jacques Derrida with regard to the gift is the fact that Chauvet is content to speak of the gift even within the context of some exchange (i.e. symbolic exchange), while Derrida cannot admit into the gift any hint of reciprocity or return. Beginning with Chauvet's concept of the symbol and its relation to the order of gift exchange—as opposed to the sign and its relation to market economy—the discussion moved on to briefly explore the reason Chauvet is comfortable speaking of the gift within symbolic exchange. For Chauvet, the symbol/gift is a bearer of the reality of the giver, a mediation of presence. As such, it is qualitatively different from economic exchange. This is thrown into sharp relief when speaking about Christian symbols in the sacraments, and the reality of grace they mediate. For Chauvet, the only way to really *receive* the gift of grace (and for him it *is* a gift) is to respond with the return-gift of one's self in service to others. Receiving and returning the gift do not invalidate the gift for Chauvet; they make it possible in the first place.

Derrida's conception of the gift is quite different. For him, reciprocity of any kind nullifies the gift. The authentic gift, for Derrida, is constituted in three ways: First, its structure is one of someone giving something to someone else. Second, its character must be complete gratuitous-

ness, else it falls back into economy. Third, its matter must be composed of value and economy, but only insofar as the gift retains a relationship of foreignness and interruption to value and economy. Consequently, Derrida composes a vision of the gift that requires a radical forgetting, if the gift is ever to take place. The giver cannot remember the gift, and the receiver cannot remember the gift—in fact neither can even continue to *recognize* the gift as such, on pain of invalidating it as the gift.

After these (all too) brief explanations of Chauvet and Derrida, the discussion moved on to maintain that Chauvet's concept of symbol gives him access to a distinction of which Derrida is either unaware or to which he refuses to assent. The qualitative difference between symbolic exchange and economic/market exchange in Chauvet is, in Derrida, no difference at all—for him, the two are essentially the same. The discussion finishes by arguing that in light of Chauvet's conflation of reception and ethics/return-gift—and Derrida's insistence that such a construction would be absurd for the gift—the hermeneutical approaches of each author most likely play a part in their respective ability or inability to see the gift in exchange (i.e. symbolic exchange). Their conclusions do not spring immediately from their start-points without reflection, but it is unlikely that their beginning assumptions have nothing to do with their completed visions.