

Reciprocating Gifts: Truth, Politics and Participation in Process

Catherine Keller AAR 07

This paper has not been edited for publication. Please request permission for formal citations-- ckeller@drew.edu.

In imagining this session in advance, I have to admit that an exchange of gifts was not the first thing that came to mind! (Perhaps I should called it “Reciprocating Misgivings.”) For as Radical Orthodoxy puts it quite rightly, no gift can be given without active receptivity, without the genuine responsiveness at which the gift aims. There would be some question as to whether such receptivity would be possible between these two schools of thought-- would we even *want* each others’ gifts? Do we mean to offer them? And if we opened ourselves to a previously unwanted gift, what if the other does not reciprocate with openness to our reciprocation? The inevitable vulnerability of gift-giving does not suggest an equality of power or of weakness ; it does suggest Milbank’s “asymmetrical reciprocity,” with its “delay” and “non-identical repetition.”

Ward and Milbank have brilliantly sniffed out the refusal of reciprocity performed in the presumed generosity of a merely kenotic, self-sacrificial giving. In resisting the pure gift in its impossibility Ward and Milbank not only question a certain poststructuralist trajectory. They also inadvertently make a donation to process theology. Partly influenced by our Wesleyan sense of grace as requiring reciprocation, process theologians have always read any unilateralist *agape* as a power drive disguised as a gift. The avowed reciprocity of the divine and the human in so-called radical orthodoxy, braced with doctrines of relationality and of participation, poses an analogy with so-called process theology; perhaps an analogy is itself a gift, allowing given similarities to intensify relationship within difference. Yet the reception of the gift remains as we will see a challenge, one that manifests itself precisely in the understanding of the ultimate receptivity.

Analogy is of course charged for our interlocutors with retro-Thomist potencies. For Whitehead analogy is the first stage of contrast, making possible complexity rather than mere incompatibility. So I am wondering if we may read our difference fruitfully--which is to say, as **contrast** in the Whiteheadian sense. The “general purpose pervading nature,” which could not finally for this mathematician be articulated without recourse to theology, is exemplified in what he calls a ‘complex structured society.’ Such complexification intensifies satisfaction for sets of component members. These may be members of a molecule or of the AAR or of a soul. The point is that “the mere complexity of givenness which procures incompatibilities has been superseded by the complexity of order which procures contrasts.”[Process and Reality100]

In the margin of that passage in my *Process and Reality* I note the fading ink of an urgent nonsequitur from sometime in the late 20th century: ‘beyond identity politics!’ My scribble signified that this complex order supports a relationality too easily occluded by the simplistic celebrations of difference or the backfiring oppositionalisms of US academics. I say this understanding that some of the US appeal of radical orthodoxy emanates not just from the considerable gifts of its progenitors, but from impatience with theological captivity to secular liberation prejudices.

But my analogy is already straining to the point of self-sacrifice. The post-essentialist space of process theology allowed many of us to catch our breath, our breadth, amidst the decades of liberative incompatibilities. But that spaciousness was never won by any contempt for the spirited feminist, ecological and antiracist movements, secular or theological. On the contrary we continue to receive their gifts, which are also *our* gifts, gratefully, deepening contrast. In the theological work of contrast we have been unfolding a multi-dimensional, constitutive relationality. We have insisted upon the cosmological width of those relations for the sake of both theology and ecology.

So when Milbank declares a “primary ontology of relation” [*Modern Theology* 17:3 July 2001 p352] we perk up. When he further argues (as against J. L. Marion) that “relation need not to be taken to be either accidental or substantial, nor as atemporally fixed and irreversible, but can instead be taken to characterize the event, which brings about new and provisional intersections and constitutions...”-- the analogy really begins to vibrate. Or when Ward insists against a Barthian dogmatics upon a cultural apologetics, highlighting the *unio naturarum* that makes our participation in the divine possible, we note the affinity of his economy of desire with our divine eros. [Ward *Christ and Culture* Blackwell 2005, p11]. This delicate naturalism suggests our shared liability to accusations of metaphysics; it predates for process theology the problem of deconstruction. Cobb’s 1965 *Christian Natural Theology* was a gift truly unreceivable in much of the US Protestant establishment, with its *nein* to cosmological, indeed Hellenistic and Thomist, impulses [just reissued as a second edition, WJK 2007].

Process theology has articulated its own primary ontology of relation in terms of Whitehead’s roaring 20’s critique of the modern subject, particularly his therapy for the Cartesian decoupling of the subject from the universe. Milbank finds in Descartes ‘the death of the soul and the birth of the subject;’ [335] he seeks to reconnect the soul to its own body first of all, and through a phenomenology of the senses to the whole decorous cosmos. The nascent soul-concept does not intend a return to substance metaphysics. Milbank declares the soul an event or event series[337]. Whitehead had also dusted off the term ‘soul,’ not to name a substance hosting predicates, but rather the rhythmic personal order of an event series. Both schools from the start challenge the core modern construction of a human subject subsisting in a solipsistic independence from matter and from God. And both also avoid the Kantian subjectivist cure.

Yet we might wonder if our neighbor’s critique of that subject is radical enough. For Milbank the “real transcendent things of this finite world are composed of formal essences which are communicable with other

things..”[354] No, I am not as you might expect about to make an anti-essentialist pounce. For Whitehead also those real things, or actual entities, are describable in terms of formal essences, called ‘eternal objects,’ or pure possibilities. But no actual entity is simply or primarily composed of these essences. Each is *also* always composed of other actual entities (as your body is composed of bodies composed of bodies..). These possibilities comprise just one of the two primary categories, the other being the actual entities themselves. Cartesian substantialism has classical roots. Contra Aristotle’s dictum ‘a substance is not present in a subject,’ Whitehead argues that–“an actual entity is present in other actual entities.” [PR50]. It is present as a participant. The eternal objects describe the *how* of this mutual participation. But creatures take part concretely in one another--not only in the communicable abstract forms. The challenge targets an analysis of the world as a “collection of primary substances qualified by universal qualities.” Perception then remains a matter of “catching of a universal quality in the act of qualifying a particular substance.” [158] While modernity broke down the substance/quality metaphysics, it retains according to Whitehead the “subjectivist principle...that the datum in the act of experience be adequately analyzed purely in terms of universals.”[157] Milbank might neither admit nor escape this core of modern subjectivism.

For Whitehead the escape is by way of what he called *prehension*, what Deleuze, more dependent upon Whitehead than his univocal immanence betrays, translated as *the fold*. The actual world is enfolded--*complicatio*-- in the becoming entity through the causal efficacy of prehensions. With its suggestion of the prehensile, prehension is Whitehead’s answer to what Milbank calls the anemia of the disconnected modern subject.--we really do *touch* the universe of others, it touches off our particular becomings.

Ward, in his hip Deleuzian exegesis of the woman suffering a flow of blood, unfolds a phenomenology of touch. “Touch initiates transference, involving each in an economy of response that is rooted in the body and calls forth somatic knowledges of recognition....Touch gives particular direction to

a body continually being situated relationally;...and it triggers a divine operation.” [CC65] Such somatic knowledge is suggestive of prehensive connection in Whitehead, where the participation of the other in the emergent self happens, related to the viscera, elemental, obscure--who touched me? I have felt a power go out of me...

Prehensive participation means: We really *are* members one of another --the fallacy of simple location may be abandoned to the modern subject and His flat detemporalized spatiality . Resonantly, Ward interprets the body of Christ as a gendered transcorporeality, read through the Johannine “mutual indwelling” as a co-abiding “that is profoundly integral to my living at all.”[CC108]. He desires a cultural, not merely ecclesial, politics of the body, in which “both relativism and universalism” can be avoided [CC176] .. His “ continual displacement or deterritorialisation of the body of Christ” [176f] is suggestive of a participatory field capable, he argues, of resisting its own commodification. As such it colludes in a planetary critique of predatory transnational capital.

In the US Cobb’s 1988 *For the Common Good* pioneered the critique of transnational corporate capitalism, a critique muffled in the academy by the trendy snubbing of any language of the common and its good. But in the face of the more facile deconstructions we do not react back to a Christian absolute. In the US context--so different in this from Europe-- such reaction is a gift to a religious right lusting for theocracy. The process Christ by contrast signals neither the absolute nor the dissolute: it is the very lure to social democratic processes of negotiation.

True to the deeper participation, Milbank himself argues for a “post liberal participatory democracy.” But to enable that democracy he advocates “ the aristocracy of an education that seeks after the common good and absolute transcendent truth.” Now I am really straining for analogy...! I will stifle the strains of Copeland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man*, let alone of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, bursting in my brain. For of course the common good does need the strength of an education that can resist both

fundamentalism and consumerism, and their joint threat to democracy. Indeed what we need here is precisely an education resistant to the American nostalgia for aristocracy. For that nostalgia in our context elected George the Second. He also advocates for absolute transcendent truth. Here the push to aristocracy (the rule of the best) produces precisely the worst--the richest claiming to be the best at the expense of the least.

In the matter of truth we hew closer to Ward, who refuses both relativism and absolutism. We work against the US pseudodemocracy in the interest of a living way, or process, in which we participate--as many as possible and as truthfully as possible. In this process reciprocity does not imply relativism but relationalism. Post liberal pluralism can go either way.

Milbank however collapses relativism and pluralism, as though openness to the truth claims of other ways, secular or religious, would count in his words--as pusillanimous new age inauthentic liberalism. Arguing that Christ is the most specific and thus the only true universal, he claims--using lovelier names-- that "We can all identify with the adroit, fluid, savage, gentle, wise, miracle-working and suffering man, just as we can all--from pole to pole--identify with Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton but cannot easily identify, with say, the *actants* within the Japanese conventions of politeness." [in *Theology and the Political*, ed Davis, Milbank, Zizek, Duke 2005, p. 400].

OK. But why might that be? Might this global identifiability have something to do with the mechanisms of religious commodification Ward discusses? Indeed is its universal not that of the neocolonial civilizing mission that is broadcasting US Christ kitch by satellite to every corner of the globe? At this level of warm recognizability in the global marketplace, wouldn't a more apt analogy to the Keaton-Christ have been not Japanese manners but the plump laughing Buddha--whom I have seen in the village markets of England and of El Salvador?

Perhaps though we would agree that the word's participation in the world exceeds the body of all Christians; and that it calls us into prehensive

reciprocities with stranger bodies. Cobb has taught many to draw pluralism beyond dialogue, into a mutual transformation in which Christians also learn to treasure our own gifts. This risky reciprocity rehearses a common good that perhaps we relationalists all desire. And that perchance God desires.

Which brings me to my final point: that God *desires*. Milbank thankfully translates the Pauline “agape as desire, and not as self-giving charity;”[TP 424] and God as infinitely desiring us. The avowal of this desire warms a classicism in which desire was often chilled by an ideal of static perfection. Ward argues for an “endlessly appetitive” Godhead [CC 84]. It was the Victorian Whitehead who inaugurated the language of divine appetite. The divine yearning for “the realization of what is not and may be” expresses the Divine Eros, with its eternal envisagement of pure possibilities drawn into the impure operations of contrast. Ironically, given the unappetizing rationalism of much Platonization, this divine lure marks our shared Platonic liability. Cobb christened this eros Christ, as the logos of creative transformation, which coaxes into becoming a human sociality transcendent of any controlling subject, human or divine. It shares the sacramental appetite of a divinity we might call omniamorous rather than omnipotent.

What the gift gives is precisely fresh participation in this economy of desire. It stirs us to reciprocate, to love widely and wisely. Milbank has written of reciprocity refused; and then granted. *But can the grant be received in his terms?* In process terms the actual occasion receives the lure and to some extent actualizes it; our own becoming concrete, our embodiment of the possibility, is itself our offering, whether in the spirit of oblivion, resentment or gratitude. For our becoming-concrete, the contrast of our given actuality with the pure possibility, becomes *part of God*. The participation is asymmetrically mutual. In Whitehead’s language (sounds less embarrassingly well, pre-post-modern, in the present scene): “this is the phase of perfected actuality, in which the many are one everlastingly, without the qualification of any loss either of individual identity or of completeness of unity. In

everlastingness, immediacy is reconciled with objective immortality.” God is as the trinity suggests a multiplicity in unity--complex, hosting all everlastingly, what I elsewhere call a Manyone-- rather than a metaphysical simplicity. This deity would have a far greater appetite for pluralism than do the majority of Christians.

It is in this theologoumenon of the consequent nature of God that the consequences of the asymmetrical reciprocity between divinity and world are revealed. Here “God is the great companion--the fellow sufferer who understands.” And it is such a relation that cannot be consummated within the terms of any orthodoxy that refuses divine receptivity, passion, multiplicity. For if God receives our active responses She is also *affected*. The moved mover breaks free of the extrabiblical straitjacket of impassivity. Yet Milbank insists on the changeless apathetic simplicity *tout court*; so doesn't the reciprocation that funds the primary ontology of relation remain at best secondary? God here remains the exception rather than the exemplification of the primary theological categories. Ward also withdraws at just this crucial juncture from a true theological reciprocalism: he confesses the “*impassible triune Godhead* [83].” Does the divine *apatheia* not model for humans a numb voyeurism toward the non contiguous suffering of others? Is it perhaps not the divine mystery, in its infinity and transcendence, that are protected by the impassible, unmoved apathy--so much as an ancient ideal of manhood?

Has reciprocity been granted only to be returned--like a gift unopened? More than any French, Jewish or secular alterity, it may be the impassible that renders the gift impossible.

But this difference does not make further fruitful contrast between radical orthodoxy and process theology impossible --should it prove reciprocally desirable.

Great illustration of the gift--its anonymous offering--its nonymous but indirect reciprocation: *The Lives of Others*.