

Being True to the Gift of the Earth

From Nietzsche to Derrida to Creation

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Truly, I am no Nietzsche expert – assuming one could be one. Hence, I will allow myself to feel only a little bit uncomfortable by employing his phrase “being true” without not really knowing what this phrase could possibly mean for him. Only a little bit uncomfortable: not only because I am no expert on Nietzsche, but also no expert on “truth” cast as an enduring philosophical problem. Accordingly, I will employ the phrase “being true” as we ordinarily understand it: to be true to something is to be honest, faithful, attuned to it. “Faithful” is a good word: that’s the word used by the Nietzsche expert, Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* version of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “remain faithful to the earth.”² Be true to it, be faithful to it.

I’m afraid the imprecision doesn’t end there: what about the other half of Nietzsche’s exhortation – “the Earth”? What on Earth do we mean by “Earth” – particularly when we are asked to be “true” to it? There are *at least* three ways one may begin to broach this imposing question. Firstly, we can try to approach it by exploring what Nietzsche himself appears to propose: that the *Übermensch* or “overman” [‘overhuman’] is the meaning of the earth.”³ As I said, I’m no Nietzsche scholar, so I’m not going to attempt to trek down that path. Secondly, we could go down a more “obvious” trail by beginning with the straightforward definition of the Earth – and, more broadly, “Creation” – as the given matrix of material beings. This path opens onto several pathways: empirical, phenomenological, and so on. But I am no specialist in these fields either. Hence, I will not attempt to articulate what “the Earth” could possibly mean via these avenues.

However, I am more competent in discussing what a “gift” means. But what has *that* got to do with being faithful to the Earth? Well, one way of interpreting and even perhaps perceiving what the Earth means is by considering

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 - 2 F. Nietzsche (1976), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed., trans. and intro. W. Kaufmann Penguin, New York, pp. 103-439, p. 125.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

it a gift (which is quite a common notion: “life is a gift,” “the world is a gift,” etc.). Hence, if we can determine the meaning of “gift,” then we can ascertain how we may be faithful to the Earth *as* a gift – *if*, that is, Earth *is* a gift. Note the crucial proviso “if” here: it registers an awareness that what we are dealing with is a possibility and a hermeneutical leap: we know the world is a given but we can only propose – rather than assert – that it is also a gift.⁴ To figure the Earth as a gift – be it a gift given or co-given by a deity, deities, the chaos, the cosmos itself, etc. – is an act of interpretation that cannot be verified. It’s an act of faith. (And a lot of acts – even “menial” ones – are acts of faith.) And we stress that, by recognizing and emphasizing the possible, undecidable, and faith-filled nature of this proposition, we are not thereby underprivileging it – indeed, we raise the possible to its proper place alongside the actual. There is no need here for hierarchical bifurcation. The possible and the undisclosed stand together with the actual and the unveiled: side-by-side. Both/and.

But the registration and affirmation of the possible raises a question directly related to the current presentation: can one *be true* to a possibility? To tell you the truth, I’m not quite sure, but if “being true” means more than recognizing and responding to the verifiable facts about things, then why can’t we be faithful to the possible and undisclosed? Why restrict our definition of what we may be faithful to? Enlightened by the profound insights of (admittedly diverse) thinkers like Blaise Pascal and Freya Mathews,⁵ I contend that the Earth is much more than what we can epistemologically, scientifically, and instrumentally grasp of it. Being faithful to it may also connote being faithful to Creation’s possibilities and mysteries.

And so, we pose the question: what is a gift? The answer is obvious enough: it is that which is given freely by someone to another and recognized as such. But Jacques Derrida has rigorously articulated in typically scandalous French-postmodern fashion that which most/all of us have intuited all along: gifting turns out to be an aporia, a paradox, a contradiction: while the gift is given gratuitously (without condition), there is nevertheless always an exchange of some kind, ranging from responses like gratitude, thanksgiving, counter-

4 As this is a short paper focusing on the possibility of Creation’s giftiness, I do not discuss here the implications of Creation as a “given.” Givenness has become a hot topic recently, primarily due to Jean-Luc Marion’s brilliant treatment of it in J. Marion (2002) *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, Stanford University Press, Stanford. Ultimately, to be true to the Earth as a given would perhaps be more radical than being faithful to its giftiness. For a discussion of this issue, refer to M. Manolopoulos (2003), “If Creation is a Gift,” PhD. Diss., Monash University, Melbourne.

5 B. Pascal (1995), *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, Penguin, London; F. Mathews (1999), “Letting the World Grow Old: An Ethos of Countermodernity,” *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 3, (2) pp. 119-137.

gifting, indebtedness, and so on.⁶ Exchange marks all three aspects of gift/ing: 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 back to the gift-giver their identity.⁷ The gift-thing itself likewise does not escape exchange economy. Whether it 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 elude the circle – remain *aneconomic* – but then it would no longer be phenomenally recognized as such. 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 obligation.

One may propose that gift-giving creates *bonds* rather than *obligations* – which is what writers like Marcel Mauss and Lewis Hyde promote in light of observations based on some other-than-western cultures.⁸ But even this “softer” kind of circularity is still a figure of exchange: a bond involves exchange or the expectation of exchange. While bonding may not be as binding as the gift-giving which typifies contemporary (western) culture, any kind of bond-producing gifting nevertheless seems to contrast with the radical gratuity we normally associate with gifting. To bond and to bind: they differ in terms of the degree of burden and expectation, but they remain bound to the ties that inevitably and problematically give rise to it.⁹

But what if gifting is generative or spiral-like rather than closed – akin to the notion of “paying a gift forward”?¹⁰ Rather than returning the gift or favour, the gift-recipient gifts to others, in a process which is more exponentially disseminative rather than calculatingly reciprocal. Rather than “paying a gift back,” one pays it forward. But even when gifting is generative rather than a closed/closing loop, the aporia remains: the gift is still marked by obligation or expectation (the obligation to pay forward) – even though this is certainly a less/non-onerous gifting.

6 J. Derrida (1992), *Given Time: I, Counterfeit Money*, trans. P. Kamuf, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

8 M. Mauss (1990), *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, Routledge, London; W. Lewis Hyde (1983), *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Random House, New York.

9 For a critique of these works, refer to R. Horner (2001), *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*, Fordham University Press, New York, pp. 12-16.

10 Refer to C. Ryan Hyde (1999), *Pay It Forward: A Novel*, Simon and Schuster, New York, and the 2000 film version, *Pay It Forward*, dir. M. Leder, Warner Brothers, United States.

Having offered a brief outline of the gift in its truly irreducible duality, we are now in a position to pose the question: what if what-is is a gift? How can our exposition of the gift guide us in our desire to be true to the Earth-gift – assuming that it is one? Before I offer a few thoughts regarding responses by intentional subjects, it is important to note how the Creation-gift's excess precedes and overcomes us. In other words, the cosmos precedes and exceeds the gift-recipient. This precedence and overwhelmingness may be expressed in phenomena like astonishment, wonder, and silence – phenomena I like to call “tremblings.”¹¹ These kinds of pre-subjective “reactions” are *very* ecological: by definition, this passivity allows the world to be (gift), rather than being mastered, controlled, commodified, and disfigured by us humans. If anything, we gift-recipients are, in a sense, acted upon *by* the Creation-gift – in the most wonderful (and sometimes challenging ways) – rather than acting upon *it* in often disfigurative and destructive ways. These tremblings are very faithful reactions to the Earth, or, perhaps more accurately, Creation casts its truth on us – rather than the other way around.

Of course, we must also consider how we, as subjects, do and should respond to the Earth-gift in modes that respect and reflect this irreducible duality, and it is in this respect that a radical gift hermeneutics can also be a kind of eco-ethico-politics. So, how can the doublesidedness of the Earth-gift inform our conscious interactivity with it? After all, one would expect a kind of “paralysis” rather than an opening when faced with the gift's double-bind (excess/exchange). Paradoxically, a solution lies not so much with finding a way *out* of the aporia but by moving *within* it. But what kind of movement is one which is nevertheless seized? *Oscillation*, perhaps: it is a rotating action that is nevertheless steadfast; to oscillate is (according to the *OED*): “To swing backwards and forwards, like a pendulum; to vibrate; to move to and fro between two points ... to vary between two limits which are reached alternately.” Unceasing alternation faithfully saves the gift's irresolvable tension, reflecting and preserving its giftness, rather than becoming fixed by one of its elements. Its “both/and” doesn't bias; it doesn't favour one element over the other: it remains true to both. Hence, we remain faithful to the gift by recognizing its duality and abiding by a corresponding oscillationality.

And so, something like an oscillating interactivity with the world (which includes ourselves, other humans, other-than-human others, and humanly manufactured things) is one that would faithfully reflect and respond to the Creation-gift-aporia. An acknowledgment of the world-gift's heterogeneity would make room for a variety of competing responses, and since this interactivity would be governed by the maintenance of the gift-tension, it would

11 Manolopoulos, *Op Cit.*

disrupt and inform the more ecologically problematic aspects of these responses. In other words, there is something of the ethical and disciplined involved in a vacillating responsiveness, each element informing and restricting the other. How so? I'll take some of the most fundamental intentional responses in turn (oscillationally): letting-be, playing-with, utilization, and reciprocity.¹²

To begin with, letting-be, which arises in the context of our tremblings, can also be an intentional response – or, more accurately, a response-without-response. This exemplary reception allows the gift to appear and be as gift. In its recognition of the gift's circularity, letting-be is akin to "returning" it – although there is nothing insulting about this kind of "return," for it not only allows the Earth to be (gift), but it also saves it from disfigurative and destructive responses. By letting it be, we allow Creation to "grow old," as Freya Mathews wonderfully puts it.¹³ Letting-be is radically non-interventionist. There should, of course, be *way much more* passivity towards the Earth. However, we are reminded that the gift truly warrants other kinds of reception – not to mention the fact that, as corporeal-beings-in-relation, an active passivity could not possibly be our one and only response: we are bound to also *not-let-the-world-be*. But an oscillational logic faithfully reminds us that our interaction be tempered by a certain passivity – a passivity which is not a negation but a kind of mediation – that allows the world to go on being (gift).

A second faithful reaction is joyous interactivity, whereby the gift is not treated non-interventionally or instrumentally, but where the "object" or "end" of the interaction is play. The "objective" is rather purposeless – a terribly threatening thing for us rational-instrumental-managerial capitalists and socialists still overcoming our Christian-Neoplatonic asceticism and puritanism. A playful response truly responds to the gratuity of the gift: take it, have fun. Of course, recreational interactivity with Creation can – and often is – excessively unecological. (The ever-expanding "snowfields" come to mind.) Hence, this response may be restricted by staying in tension with letting-be and other circular-reflecting reactions.

Having referred to evidently eco-noble receptions and interactions like letting-be and play, one may expect well-meaning ecologists to be offended by the allowance of an instrumental use of the Creation-gift. However, staying true to the gift's duality, responding in an instrumental way reflects the gift's gratuity: it is there for the taking. Nevertheless, when it appears in extreme forms like hyper-commodification and hyper-consumption, there is an utter lack of acknowledgment of gratuity's other – circularity. As an aporia, the gift makes

12 For a detailed discussion of these responses, refer to Manolopoulos, *Op Cit*.

13 Mathews, "Letting the World Grow Old"; also refer to Mathews (2004), "Letting the World Do the Doing," *Australian Humanities Review* 33
www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-August-2004/mathews.html.

room for an instrumentality that would also make room for competing practices, thereby restricting an ecologically devastating instrumentalism like techno-consumerism. In a severely capitalized world, however, the opposite is true: almost everything is figured instrumentally almost all of the time, which is being terribly unfaithful to the Earth.

Now, a fourth category of responses is that of exchange or reciprocity, which incorporates a variety of reactions, such as counter-gifting, thanksgiving, and a sense of indebtedness. One may, for instance, feel indebted to God for the gift of Creation – and one should note here that the very word “religion” derives from the Latin *religare*, to bind, indicating its circular aspect; one may (also) feel indebted or grateful to Mother Earth, and/or to one’s parents. Even though we lovers of gratuity (including Nietzsche and Derrida) love to emphasize the gift’s graciousness, and desire freedom from a burdensome indebtedness borne of the pervasive circular logic that counts, calculates, burdens, I nevertheless and simultaneously maintain that the identification of the gift is integral to it, even though it is precisely this element that complicates it.

Apart from the theoretical imperative to preserve the gift’s circularity, there is also another profoundly positive aspect to the faithful retention of the element of exchange: it signals the gift’s relationality; gifting, after all, is gifting-*between*. This resounds ecologically, promoting the reality of interdependency and reciprocity. We could formulate it this way: if excess signifies things like linearity and singularity, then exchange denotes and reminds us of the truth of our interrelatedness and interindebtedness. Since we are beings-in-relation, gifting will always involve “strings attached”: this is precisely what it means to be corporeal. Hence, a denial of the gift’s economic aspect may be understood as a denial of relationality, being untrue to this matrix with its requisite responses and responsibilities.

If thinkers devote too much time on excess and individuation, there is a danger that the element of our radical interconnectedness is ignored, marginalized, devalued, or forgotten. One even senses this danger in Derrida’s (and Nietzsche’s) espousal of excess and squander.¹⁴ The eco-political risk of the “pure gift” is articulated by ecotheologian Marion Grau in an essay entitled “Erasing ‘Economy’”;¹⁵ she ponders: “We might wonder whether the gift, given without return and reciprocity, truly represents a desirable alternative to [exchange] economy...”¹⁶ Grau pursues this line of inquiry:

Is a ‘untied’ gift in any way salvific for our relations? Exploitative economies have often depended upon the nonreciprocity of women or slaves to be the

14 Manolopoulos, *Op Cit.*

15 M. Grau (2002), “Erasing ‘Economy’: Derrida and the Construction of Divine Economies,” *CrossCurrents* 52, (3) pp. 360-371, p. 361.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 365.

willingly or unwillingly 'gifting' contributors . . . so that those in power could convert this symbolic capital that came to them as a 'gift' . . . into realized capital. . . . Is not part of the problem . . . that they have not respected enough the need for a somewhat balanced reciprocity, that women, slaves, creation, environment have been excluded from a truly reciprocal and inclusive economy?¹⁷

Hence, in order to faithfully redress and restrict this drive towards the "pure" or "absolute," thinking the two elements of the gift together ensures that the element of circularity opens up the integration or re-integration of relation and reciprocity which is all-the-more vital in an epoch of unparalleled ecological untruthfulness. Being oscillationally faithful to circularity counteracts any responses evoked by gratuity which can easily slide towards a squandering or wastefulness reaching its zenith with hyper-capitalism. And vice versa: being true to gratuity acts as a resistance to the ever-closing circle of our commercializing societies. When we respond to Creation – or when we *will* respond to it – with more reciprocity, gratitude, and thanksgiving, it is more likely the Earth-gift will be treated more gently, carefully, truly.

And so, if Creation is a gift – a gift in all its splendid paradoxicality – then it would inspire and inform a truly oscillational interactivity with it, which may save it. And, if another name for an interactivity marked by letting-be, utility, enjoyment, and reciprocity is "love," then, in a word, the Earth should be *loved*. But I shall conclude, as I began, with Nietzsche. A few lines after his exhortation to be faithful to the Earth, he proclaims: "Once the sin against God was the greatest sin. . . . To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing . . ." *That*, I know to be true.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 368.