Review of Women and the gift: beyond the given and the all-giving, by Morny Joy

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***Women and the Gift: Beyond the Given and the All-Giving.* Ed. Morny Joy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2013.**

Most feminist philosophers will be familiar with at least some of the literature around the gift that has appeared in recent years, particularly in the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous who have both attempted to deconstruct the implicit gendering of the concept. In Morny Joy's edited collection, however, the field is somewhat broader and includes also contributions from scholars of classical, gender and predominantly religious studies, but surprisingly not from anthropology where the question of the gift has most strongly emerged. My own position as an eager reviewer of the book is driven both by a background in feminist philosophy, but more recently as a researcher into the significance of organ transplantation where the term gift is freely used to describe the donated organ. The move from abstract conceptions to the visceral materiality of the problematic has resolved none of the ambivalence associated with the term and I was delighted to have the opportunity to reflect on it through the eyes of others, albeit few of the essays address concrete examples.*

What Joy has set out for her contributors to examine is the familiar scenario in which women are deeply associated with the gift but only – in masculinist literature at least - as the given, literally and metaphorically the objects of exchange, or as the all-giving in the mode of self-abnegation occasioned by infinite care. Gifting and the gift economy are on this reading a feature of male power and dominance that excludes the possibility of feminine subjectivity.* In Joy's understanding, the works of anthropologists such as Boas, Malinowski and Levi-Strauss and their subsequent underpinning of critical analyses produced by Mauss and latterly Derrida has hinged on a largely unchallenged reproduction of European values regarding gender relations. The extensive literature of the gift has confirmed and consolidated some damaging sexual stereotypes – and this turns out to include much that has been written by feminist scholars – rather than opening up new possibilities that would reconfigure the status of women*. In her introduction, Joy discusses approvingly the notion of the gift as radical generosity as developed by Ros Diprose, but sadly Diprose is not a contributor and nor is she mentioned again in the course of the book. Instead the underlying assumption remains that the task is to rethink reciprocity – a form that Diprose rejects - as a framing device for a more feminist-friendly conceptualisation of the gift.

As with every collection, the hopes and expectations of the editor are variously satisfied and thwarted, and although all the contributors would assent to the basic premise that there is something injurious about the conventional operations of the gift, very few are able to provide viable alternatives. As an exercise in critique this is fine, but it better illustrates the entrenchment of masculinist thought than provides affirmative and non-exploitative ways of transforming women's ways of being in the world. Not unexpectedly, the majority of contributors cite Marcel Mauss' seminal work on the economy of the gift in which reciprocity is both an obligation and a burden, and in which any discussion of the role of women is notable for its near absence. Nonetheless his influence on later scholars - who have absorbed the more common anthropological truism that women figure primarily as objects whose exchange oils the maintenance of intra- and intercommunal relations - is ubiquitous. It is invigorating, then, to find two essays that turn the authorised discourse on its head. First, Kathleen O'Grady introduces women's desire into the gift relation through a reading of Kristeva's psychoanalysis which she sees as repudiating Mauss. For Kristeva, it is the gift of love founded on the mother's desire for another outside the maternal-infant dyad that opens the possibility for the child of moving from sameness to a recognition of the difference that initiates subjectivity (107). Morny Joy, in her concluding essay, speaks much more directly to Mauss and questions in particular the Eurocentricity that dominates the anthropological origins of the concept of the gift. Her argument is that Mauss and other commentators rely on work that uncritically reflects the anthropologists' own cultural attitudes towards women (194). She makes a strong case, though I am left a little uneasy by her too easy dismissal of Derrida – both here and in her Introduction – whom she calls an 'armchair synthesiser'

(212). Irigaray's move toward recognition as the essence of the gift – a model also commended by Maria Cimitile in her essay on Irigaray and Heidegger, and by Lorraine Markotic - comes nearest to satisfying Joy, though Irigaray does not escape censure for her own failure to interrogate colonial attitudes.

Perhaps it because she does address Derrida more adequately that Markotic's chapter on Nietzsche and the gift opens up some absorbing possibilities. Markotic is by no means uncritical of either male philosopher but finds in them a platform for her discussion of gratitude as a form of generosity in relation to giving (88). Against what she claims as a western unease about showing gratitude - and hence a putative loss of self-sufficiency - that entails a risk of the gift being taken for granted, Markotic argues that gratitude is a welcome form of recognition that precisely undoes notions of wholeness and completeness (85). I am not convinced that the gift being taken for granted is quite in line with Derrida's exhortation that both givers and receivers must forget the gift as a mode of exchange, but I liked the attempt to work through rather than dismiss such models. The reappearance of Derrida in the following chapter by Nancy J. Holland shows him to be as ubiquitous within the field of enquiry as Mauss, though here the emphasis changes to reflect a concern with the etymology of the term *gift*. In her section, *The Poisonous Gift* (93), Holland traces the intriguing relationship between the meanings of a present, marriage and poison. Working through issues of sexual difference, silence, time and friendship, she fully exposes the (im)possibility of the gift, and its slipperiness in relation to women. Holland's very short but excellent essay is perhaps the most thought-provoking of the contributions, really from the sheer density of its questions for wisely she offers no answers.

One final chapter that I would like to mention specifically is Sal Renshaw's somewhat unexpected turn to Cixous' account of her relationship both to a childhood dog, Fips, and her cat in adulthood, Thea. Now Cixous of course is well-established as a commentator on the gift where she has strong affinities to Derrida particularly concerning the question of its (im)possibility. For both that is an affirmative beginning, a point of take-off, rather than resignation to closure (132-3), and Renshaw quotes generously to make her point. The further step is the attempt to rethink the gift in relation to radical otherness, which she reads through Cixous' own engagement with the animal other. The dog, and more importantly the cat, of the narrative are barely mentioned as gifts, though that is what they are, and Cixous' prior emphasis on giving becomes a reflection on how to receive well. Where the story of the dog exemplifies a failure in receiving that is nevertheless partially exonerated by adult reflection, the relation with Thea the cat successfully undoes not just human/animal boundaries but also those between self/other and giving/receiving (147). Cixous' story 'The Cat's Arrival' bears a heavy weight that poses a powerful challenge to binary logic, but for Renshaw it is not without problems. As she points out, where Cixous has been usually associated with a critique of sacrifice, selflessness and suffering in relation to giving, here there is a disturbing affirmation of love as sacrifice (134-5), with of course all their sexual markings. The story of Fips can certainly be read in this manner, but when it comes to Thea, I must disagree in as far as the cat refuses Cixous' casual action of abandonment and transcends her careless dismissal. As Renshaw concedes this is indeed love without obligation.

What then to make of the collection as a whole? I did not find any answers to my own ambivalences, but that for me would hardly make for a successful reading. As Joy puts it after contesting the blinkered vision of earlier commentators, 'the gift will remain an enigma to an acquisitive society, exemplified by contemporary capitalism' (213), and I conclude that her hopeful final comments that we women are finding a different way to live are as yet unrealised. What her collective enquiry into giving and more specifically into women and the gift reveals is certainly the need to contest the models of the past and to think alternative modes of gifting that recognise others in their integrity. There is everything still to contest, but it is good to have a clearer view of what remain the horizons of aspiration.

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