

The Elusive Gift:

Rescuing Ethics as Response to Divine Grace from Reformation Depredations

As a child, I remember my confusion every Christmas over the strange and onerous rituals of gift and gratitude that burdened what ought to have been a fairly straightforward process. If these gifts were acts of kindness, why were they treated like social obligations? And if they were obligations, why was I obligated to respond with careful and ritualized expressions of gratitude? As it turns out, this bewilderment in the face of gift-giving was not unique to me, nor even to every child of our age; it is a bewilderment which many of our greatest philosophers and theologians still face: what is a gift? What is gratitude? Can a gift be given?

It is this last, most fundamental question that John Milbank seeks to answer in a 1995 article by that title,¹ offering a rebuttal to the deconstruction of the gift by Jacques Derrida and other recent thinkers. This task of reconstructing the ethics of the gift has led Milbank and others, such as Stephen Webb,² toward a reconstruction of ethics itself in terms of gift-giving, a task with rich theological implications and which requires a careful assessment and engagement of the Christian ethical tradition. Unsurprisingly, this task of assessment and engagement leads us ere long to a consideration of the Protestant Reformation, that fiery crucible in which much of modern theology and ethics was forged. Milbank sketches some of the forms that such an engagement might take, and Webb makes a start of it in a brief interaction with John Calvin. In this essay, I will further this engagement by examining the dynamic of divine grace and human works--that is, of gift and response--in Martin Luther and John Calvin, and how each offers an unstable account of the gift that risks destabilizing Christian ethics as whole. The inability of either to account for the divine gift of grace in a way that empowers human response-gifts means that neither can clearly speak of

¹ John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given?" *Modern Theology* 11:1 (Jan. 1995): 119-161.

² Stephen Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

God's gift as the ground of ethics. The solution to this dilemma can only be hinted at within the limits of this brief essay, but I believe that, in different but complementary ways, it has been well-charted by Milbank and Webb, and I shall use their work as a starting point.

First, then, why does gift-giving function as a paradigm for ethics as a whole, and why has the phenomenon proved so problematic in modern ethics? There are two answers to the first question: first, "giving a gift" immediately suggests itself as a metaphor for ethical action in general--to do a good deed for another person, or for God, is to give them a gift of charity, a gracious self-offering; second, the debated conditions of possibility for a gift (must a gift be free, or can it be constrained? must a gift be entirely gracious, expecting nothing in return, or does it demand a response?) are the two of the most hotly debated conditions of possibility for ethical action as a whole--the problem of freedom vs. necessity and the problem of self-love vs. self-sacrifice.

What about the second question--where does the problem arise? Well, simply put, in the conditions of possibility for a gift just mentioned. These conditions have become more problematic, perhaps, as a result of the growing ubiquity of self-interested contract-exchange as the most prevalent form of social exchange in the modern West, a phenomenon that has the polarizing effect of leading us to cynically concede gift-giving as just another form of exchange, or else to jealously guard it as the pure opposite of such exchange. Webb summarizes the two poles: "At one extreme...gift giving is portrayed as the exact opposite of the economic activity of bartering, trading, and exchanging. It is a spontaneous and extravagant gesture that violates the laws of economics by surpassing the measurement of this for that."³ He calls this *squandering*. "At the other extreme," he continues, "gift giving can be reduced to economics proper. In this minimizing perspective, generosity is always secretly ruled by the rules of economics. Giving is really a form

³ Ibid 14.

of exchange, although it pretends to be something more.... Generosity as such is thought to be impossible, although ideologically it can be a useful even if imaginary idea.”⁴

The first pole, the free, unilateral gift, has been preferred by many modern ethicists, especially Christians, due to its apparent affinity with the Christian ideal of self-sacrificial *agape*. And yet, taken to its extreme, as it is by Jacques Derrida, it proves itself to be an anti-Christian embrace of death, as Milbank shows in “The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice.”⁵ In insisting on the necessity of a gift entirely free from obligation without expectation of return, Derrida also argues its impossibility. For one thing, every giver is always acting from a standpoint of obligation, every giver is always already in the position of a receiver, and so every gift that we give is in some sense the payment of a debt that we owe to Being for our existence. Only God could offer a true first gift.⁶ More frustrating for Derrida, though, is the inability for the giver to escape the return of his gift. If the receiver acknowledges the gift at all, the gift is frustrated, because the giver has received some satisfaction for his giving: “The gift cannot be received as gift. Simple recognition, let alone praise, commendation, or acknowledgment, is enough to annul it. ‘Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent.’”⁷ These considerations press Derrida (and other recent philosophers) to the absurdist conclusion that only death can be a true gift, for in dying for someone, I cease to be at the moment of my giving, and am therefore unable to receive or be conscious of any return.⁸ John Milbank, in examining this conclusion, points out that even here, the pure gift is unlikely to be present: “For the gift to be truly disinterested, the giver of his own life

⁴ Ibid 15.

⁵ John Milbank, “The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice,” *First Things* 91 (Mar. 1999): 33-38.

⁶ Milbank, “Can a Gift Be Given?” 130.

⁷ Webb 69, quoting Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 13; see also Milbank, “Can a Gift Be Given?” 130.

⁸ Milbank, “Ethics of Self-Sacrifice,” 1

must not be able even to imagine the future pleasure of its recipients.”⁹ Clearly, the ideal of the pure gift is striving after wind. Expectation of return taints even the most radical disinterestedness.

But what about the alternative? A reciprocal, exchange-based model of gift giving was promoted by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, in his 1924 book *The Gift*,¹⁰ which has proved since to be a major catalyst for theological and philosophical discussion of the nature of the gift. Mauss, in a thorough anthropological study, shows how, in most primitive societies, gift-giving is the primary basis of economy. Gift-giving takes place not as individual, unilateral private acts, but as an endless pattern of public gift-exchange, in which every reception of a gift generates an obligation that keeps the cycle going, often safeguarded by elaborate rituals. Of course, if gift-giving is so thoroughly embedded in exchange, one wonders in what sense we are still talking about “gifts” and not contracts, the standard pattern of exchange in our society. Some of Mauss’s readers, like Derrida, concluded that Mauss is no longer talking about the gift, but has dissolved gift into economic exchange.¹¹ And indeed, even in Mauss’s accounts of tribal gift-exchange, it is clear that pervasive self-interest and manipulation often bely the idyllic term “gift.”¹² For Christian ethics, Mauss’s account raises a troubling question: is gift-giving, even between God and man, nothing but a crass *quid pro quo*?

As soon as we ask this question, we are reminded of a time when this question was asked with passionate urgency all across Christendom--the Reformation. After all, Christian ethics has to give an account of itself as a response of some kind to God, and this account has usually involved some concept of the priority of divine grace, of God’s gift to us, as the basis for any ethical response on our part. If, then, Christian ethical action is a response to God’s gracious gift, how are we to characterize this gift? How do we characterize our response? Does God give unilaterally to us,

⁹ Ibid. 6.

¹⁰ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*

¹¹ Webb 74.

¹² Mauss 22.

expecting nothing in return? Then how can his gift elicit an ethical response? Does God give reciprocally to us, inviting us to respond with a return gift of good works? But this implies that we are capable of genuinely giving back to God, which suggests that God is not perfectly self-sufficient, and which, if the gift is indeed reciprocal, seems to put God in our debt. We have thus stumbled headlong into the central problem of soteriology--the relationship between God's grace and our works. An overly unilateral account of the gift, of God's free grace, would lead us toward the ditch of antinomianism. An overly reciprocal account would seem to land us in Pelagianism.

Actually, though, it is a bit more complicated than this. If we assume the priority of God's giving (as a consistent Christian ethics must, it seems), we may characterize this gift in three main ways:

1. God gives unilaterally to us, expecting nothing in return
2. God gives semi-unilaterally to us, expecting our gratitude in return
3. God gives reciprocally to us, requiring a reciprocal gift in response.

The first appears to leave no room for an ethical response, except possibly a response of imitation, in which, in no way constrained by the prior divine gift, we give freely and unilaterally back to God, echoing his initial free gift. We can identify Luther's model of ethics under this paradigm. The second accepts, with the first, that we cannot truly give anything back to God, but, unlike the first, maintains that we must do so; therefore, we do so in terms of gratitude, which is the form all our ethical action must take. This approach constitutes the heart of Calvin's ethical paradigm. The third could be taken in many directions, some of them objectionable, such as Pelagian works-righteousness. Or, the reciprocation which God asks of us could itself become the basis for further divine gifts, and further grateful responses, so that the gift is never-ending, but sustains itself in horizontal exchange between man and man, and vertical exchange between man and God. It is such a model that Milbank and Webb promote. In any case, the third need not result in Pelagianism, the error of which consists not necessarily in saying that we can give anything to

God, but in saying that our ethical gifts can precede the gift of God's grace. Indeed, any Christian ethics which loses the fundamental character of a response to God's gift of grace is liable to run aground on the shoals of heterodoxy very soon. Ironically, the Reformation theologies that begin with so uncompromising an account of divine grace risk doing just that, as I shall now explore.

Martin Luther's account of grace and good works is constructed in stark opposition to what he saw as the attitude of late medieval piety, which in its worst forms, was thoroughly Pelagian, representing God's grace as a commodity that man's ethical action (or even hard cash) could buy, rather than a free gift that preceded any true ethical response. In reaction, Luther sought to purge the economy of grace from any economic taint--God's grace to man is a pure gift, free of contract, debt, or any such stain; unconstrained and unilateral, it requires nothing in return, nor can man's action cannot give anything of real value to God which might prompt Him to return anything to man. Yet this concept of a "pure gift" is, as seen already with Derrida, highly unstable and self-cancelling, and so it is unlikely to provide firm enough ground upon which to build a Christian ethics.

Luther's strength is his emphasis on the absolute priority of God's giving; ethical action is not possible from a standpoint in which man must act first, hoping that God will then respond. Thus his sharp critique of late medieval piety: "They look for good only after the works are done; and so they build their confidence not on divine favor, but on the works they have done, that is, on sand and water, from which they must at last take a cruel fall."¹³ Instead, Luther insists, that works can only be good when the doers are already assured, through faith, that God has given his grace and favor: "If these things are done with such faith that we believe that they please God, then they are praiseworthy, not because of their virtue, but because of such faith, for which all works are of equal value."¹⁴ But this last phrase points to a problem: Luther's desire to establish the indifference of

¹³ Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works* (Hard Press, 2006), 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 18.

good works--their non-necessity and their inability to attain value before God--leads Luther to empty the concept of concrete content:

“In this faith all works become equal, and one is like the other...For the works are acceptable not for their own sake, but because of the faith which alone is, works and lives in each and every work without distinction.”¹⁵

In the end, it looks not so much as if faith in God’s gift is the source from which concrete good works flow; rather, *faith itself* is the only good work, such that any action taken in faith, no matter what it is, constitutes a good work.¹⁶ The only virtuous response to God’s gift is not a concrete counter-gift, but simply faith--the acknowledgment of the gift.

This should not surprise us, for, if we allow for the existence of concrete works that are good as such, then these would seem to offer something of value to God, so as to render him in our debt. This Luther wants to avoid at all costs. Even our responses to God’s original gift cannot have the character of meaningful return gifts to God, gifts which might provide a basis for expecting a further return from God. The Christian’s faithful obedience looks for no reward: “A Christian has no need of any work or law in order to be saved since through faith he is free from every law and does everything out of pure liberty and freely. He seeks neither benefit nor salvation since he already abounds in all things and is saved through the grace of God because in his faith he now seeks only to please God.”¹⁷ “He *serves God purely for nothing, content that his service pleases God.*”¹⁸ Such giving, purely for the sake of giving and not for any return, seems more divine than human, pure and gratuitous.

¹⁵ Ibid. 15.

¹⁶ This despite Luther’s avowed purpose in the treatise, which is to encourage and describe concrete forms of good works. It is worth noting, though it cannot be explored here, that Luther’s view here takes on another feature of the Derridean view of the gift, as critiqued by Milbank--indifference to the content of the gift.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, trans. W.A. Lambert, in *Three Treatises* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 298.

¹⁸ Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, 16. Italics mine. Note that, of course, Luther cannot escape speaking of the return of the gift that comes through the delight of pleasing the recipient. He resists the *reductio ad absurdum* of the unilateral gift that Derrida insists on.

Indeed, how else could Luther characterize our ethical action? If God's gift of grace is completely free and unilateral--no strings attached, no return required--then how could there be any basis for an ethical response? Shall we not sin that grace may abound? Luther's only available route is to insist on good works, not as a duly required response, but as an imitation of the free, unilateral divine gift that pre-empted them. Just as God gives grace to us unconstrained, asking nothing in return, let us also freely give to him (and to our neighbor), asking nothing in return.

Luther makes explicit this pattern of imitation in a crucial passage:

[The Christian] ought to think: 'Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true....I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me...[with] a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss. For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligations....he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward. As his Father does, distributing all things to all men richly and freely, making 'his sun rise on the evil and on the good,' so also the son does all things and suffers all things with that freely bestowing joy which is his delight when through Christ he sees it in God, the dispenser of such great benefits.¹⁹

In this passage, the Christian's self-giving love, already heedless of divine reward, as we have already seen, is depicted as utterly heedless of the response of fellow men, not only eschewing the need for a return gift, but even of the acknowledgment of gratitude. So reckless is this giving that it is happy to take the form of "waste." Without a doubt, this account of gift, despite its many strengths, falls under the heading of what Webb describes as a "squandering" model of giving. As such, it is susceptible to the *reductio ad absurdum* that Derrida sketches, in which the attempt to purge the gift of all exchange ends by annihilating the gift.

We are thus left to doubt whether the ethical response asked of the believer--the pure gift, is even coherent, since no gift can be truly heedless of any return. We also discover problems in Luther's reduction of the ethical gift to mere intentionality, indifferent to the concrete content of the

¹⁹ Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*, 304.

gift-action. Moreover, Luther gives us an account of our ethical action as a completely free, unconstrained gift, yet one which can take place only as a response to another gift, a gift which was itself supposed to be indifferent to response, suggesting that the notion of a genuinely *unilateral* gift is too unstable to survive uncompromised.

But an even more serious tension arises in this account, for Luther places the believer here in a similar position to God Himself, under no necessity to give and under no necessity to receive back. Not only is such freedom from necessity impossible, but it deeply problematizes the relationship of our good works and God's prior gift, a relationship which Luther began by seeking to establish. Luther's Christian is enabled to do truly good works (those free from necessity) by his discovery that, thanks to God's gift of grace, he is free from the necessity to work. His subsequent good works, however, as free, disinterested gifts, bear no intrinsic relation to God's prior gift, but rather must stand in abstraction from it and from any further gift that God might offer. We are left to wonder, then: is ethics indeed a response to God's grace, or is it merely a spontaneous and disinterested benevolence?

John Calvin, recognizing some of these problems, sought to avoid the flirtations with antinomianism in Luther's theology, and while equally insisting on our inability to return God's gift of grace, still maintained our obligation to respond. He accomplishes this by propounding the second model of divine gift and human response listed above: a "semi-unilateral" gift, requiring gratitude in return. Man's ethical response then is not, as for Luther, a gift of squandering in imitation of God's gift, but a fulfilling of the debt of gratitude demanded by God's gift. However, this conception brings with it another set of problems, which leave us wondering whether God's grace is truly a gift and not a burden.

Calvin concurs with Luther in highlighting the priority and importance of God's prevenient gift; indeed, it is a favorite theme of his. "Calvin's God is the epitome of liberality, offering

humanity a great and lavish abundance of goodness”²⁰ and the chief function of mankind is thus to be thankful, so that “Calvin practically equates the *imago* with the *actio* of gratitude.”²¹ It is this failure of gratitude that constitutes man’s cardinal sin, and it is for this reason that God gives even more abundantly in Christ, that our ingratitude may be forgiven and that we may be driven to gratitude for this new grace.

For Calvin, like Luther, God’s infinity and freedom mean that although he keeps giving to us, we can never truly give back to Him. Indeed, according to Calvin, when God loves and rewards our works, he is really just loving and rewarding his own works, so that God receives only what God himself gives. Calvin describes this in terms that, though partly Scriptural, tend uncomfortably toward what sounds like divine narcissism:

For the Lord cannot fail to love and embrace the good things that he works in them through his Spirit. But we must always remember that God ‘accepts’ believers by reason of works only because he is their source and graciously, by way of adding to his liberality, deigns also to show ‘acceptance’ toward the good works he has himself bestowed....God’s children are pleasing and lovable to him, since he sees in them the marks and features of his own countenance....Since, therefore, wherever God contemplates his own face, he both rightly loves it and holds it in honor, it is said with good reason that the lives of believers, framed to holiness and righteousness are pleasing to him.²²

Here we have a thoroughly unilateral account of God’s gift, such that even God’s reception of the return gifts that we offer is itself another unreturnable gift.

Yet, as already mentioned, Calvin is more careful than Luther to avoid the antinomian conclusion, and is thus concerned to emphasize that God’s gift is not so unilateral as not to require a response (even if ultimately that response too is only the work of God himself). Thus Calvin conceives of our gratitude as much more than a mere sentiment, but a full-fledged ethical response,

²⁰ Webb 94.

²¹ Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Prss, 1993), 44, quoted in Webb 95. Webb notes that Gerrish is here quoting T.F. Torrance, though he does not provide a specific citation.

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.), ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), II:807.

a duty that we owe as the least we could offer in return for his measureless gifts to us. “The sacrifice of thanksgiving is presented to God only by those who, loaded with his boundless favors, repay him with their whole self and everything they do.”²³

This, however, simply replaces one difficult concept (gift), with another that is at least as problematic (gratitude). In analyzing this concept, Webb points out that although gratitude does function as “a substitute for the counter-gift, the promise of a return that would not be a return,”²⁴ it remains embedded in the the paradigm of exchange. Indeed, rather than freeing us from the need to give back, it seems to trap us forever in the exchange that has once been inaugurated: ““Once we have received something good from another person, once he has preceded us with his action, we no longer can make up for it completely, no matter how much our own return gift or service may objectively or legally surpass his own.”” Gratitude, then, is a necessary consequence of reacting to a prior action; it is the feeling that accompanies dependence and passivity.”²⁵ Webb summarizes,

If gratitude is owed--and we do frequently use the awkward phrase, “a debt of gratitude”--then it is easy to understand how its expression can become problematic....If gratitude upon the reception of a gift is morally required, then the giver who does not receive gratitude is justified in judging the ungrateful recipient. Yet, condemning ingratitude makes the original gift suspect; such begrudging complaints suggest that the giving was not free and gratuitous. On a general level, then, gratitude seems obligatory, but on a specific level that requirement cannot be spoken or otherwise indicated.²⁶

This notion of a debt of gratitude applied to the economy of grace thus seems to threaten both the genuineness of the divine gift, which risks instead becoming just one side in a rather oppressive contract, and the genuineness of our response, which seems compulsory rather than gratuitous: “Is gratitude connected to the burden of an impossible debt, or does it spring forth from the same gratuity as grace? Is a gratitude based on insolvency and irreciprocity possible?”²⁷ Calvin proves

²³ Gerrish 155, quoted in Webb 96.

²⁴ Webb 51.

²⁵ Ibid. 52, with quote from Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), 392.

²⁶ Webb 52-3.

²⁷ Ibid. 96.

Webb's suspicion to be well-founded, saying, "Therefore, the Lord bids us sincerely perceive and consider within ourselves that we perform no unrequired duties for him but render him our due service. And rightly! For we are servants obligated to render so many services that we cannot perform them, even though all our thoughts and all our members were turned to the duties of the law." In clear contrast to Luther, Calvin says bleakly, "let us not boast of voluntary liberality when we are constrained by necessity."²⁸

Therefore, although ostensibly the sinner is set free by Christ's gift, Calvin finds himself laboring to emphasize the heavy burden of gratitude that we owe: "If gratitude correlates to grace, it should be simple, easy, and free, yet it must be, on Calvin's own admission, enforced, compelled, and constrained."²⁹ The logic of gratitude makes the debt of gratitude proportionate to the gift received, which in this case is infinite. Webb mournfully summarizes the resulting dilemma:

To match the traditional transcendent creativity of God, responsive gratitude would have to go on and on and on. Where could it possibly end? How could it possibly be enough? A gift that is unique and perfect is more demanding than giving, and it correlates with a gratitude born of guilt, not joy....our gratitude is an expression of our inability to give. We give gratitude because we cannot give anything else...The resulting gratitude would have to try to prove itself by an infinitely anxious and strenuous labor, but how could such futile labor possibly be called--gratitude?³⁰

Calvin's account of gift-ethics thus avoids the paralyzing inconsistencies that dog Luther's account, but at a grave cost, leaving us to wonder whether the terminology of "gift and gratitude" is still appropriate. For we are left, despite Calvin's protestations, with a grace that is enslaving, not liberating, a gift that crushes the recipient under its infinite weight, rather than lifting him up to stand confidently before God, that binds his hands rather than freeing them to joyfully offer his gifts in return. Once the ethical posture becomes one of infinite duty, gift and gratitude are increasingly marginalized; indeed, we may well wonder if Calvin's Christian is not at risk of falling back into the same bondage of toiling to please God that Luther set out to purge from the Church.

²⁸ Calvin II:781.

²⁹ Webb 97.

³⁰ Ibid. 89-90.

Subsequent Calvinist theology bears out this concern: paradoxically, while more emphatic than any other tradition in its insistence on the graciousness of God--surely a source of joy if there ever was one--it is yet widely perceived as dour, harsh, servile, and demoralizing.

It seems then that with Calvin as with Luther, we find that as surely as God's grace is praised and elevated, and his gifts are glorified as the source of all human response, just as surely does that grace cease to be grace, and human response cuts free from the gift. The unilateral gift is so pure and so powerful that it cancels itself, and no sooner is ethics wrested from human ability and moored to the rock of God's grace than it is cast adrift to seek a new anchor. Either the gift of God's grace is so pure that it needs no response, as for Luther, and thus our action toward God and others can no longer be coherently understood as a response to God, or else the gift is so great that the response must be infinite, and thus slavery seems an apter metaphor than gift and gratitude. There is no question, of course, that both Luther and Calvin resisted these implications of their theology, and attempted to nuance their accounts accordingly. However, it seems likely that these foundational moves sketched above are so decisive that they will undermine any countervailing tendencies or else leave unresolvable tensions within each's paradigm.

Fundamentally, both Luther and Calvin share the same basic flaw--they desire to emphasize God's gift-giving at the expense of man's gift-giving. God's grace can only be exalted by a corresponding abasement of man and his ability to respond; the greatest imaginable God for them is a God who is so high that he cannot truly receive anything that man might offer. But this picture stands in contrast to much of Scripture and of classical Christian theology, which, while always preserving the freedom and priority of God's giving, have yet insisted that man can genuinely offer gifts and sacrifices well-pleasing to God, out of joyful gratitude for God's prior gifts and in joyful expectation of His response in subsequent gifts. The Old Testament is replete with the image of sacrifices as presenting "a sweet aroma to Yahweh," an image which Paul, the apostle of grace, has no hesitation in applying to our works of mercy and service (Phil 4:18). Indeed, David is so bold as

to inject the language of exchange into the gift-economy of grace and response in Psalm 18: “The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me. For I have kept the way of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God” (Ps. 18:20-21, KJV). Aquinas recognized that this attitude is no sin, as Jennifer Herdt points out in a recent article: “Noting explicitly that it is not sinful to know and approve of one’s own good character and good works, Aquinas insists that magnanimity can itself be an expression of humility, a recognition of our fundamental dependency on God; magnanimity ‘makes a man deem himself worthy of great things, in consideration of the gifts he holds from God.’”³¹ God’s gifts to us ought to be no cause for self-deprecation: “God’s glory is not increased by denying the value of created agency. There is here no zero-sum game, no competition in which if one is honored, another is denied honor. To see things in that way is to have a false sense of humanity as standing over against God, rather than as issuing from God’s creative love and destined for participation in the divine life.”³²

Perhaps the greatest God is in fact the one who is not great in inverse proportion to man’s greatness, but who is able to raise man up without Himself suffering any diminution, the one whose gift is so great that it enables true response gifts, gifts that God receives gratefully and repays with further gifts. Might not such a gift, one that creates an infinite and eternal gift-exchange, be greater than one which can be greeted only with mute stammerings?

³¹ Jennifer Herdt, “Christian Humility, Courtly Civility, and the Code of the Streets,” *Modern Theology* 25:4 (Oct. 2009), 553, citing Thomas Aquinas, S.T. II-II 132 A 1, I-II 129.3 ad 4.

³² Herdt 553.