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Emptiness and Otherness: A Comparison Between the “Gift Debate” in French Postmodern Thought and *Dāna-Pāramitā* in Mahāyāna Buddhism

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Emptiness and Otherness: A Comparison Between the “Gift Debate” in French Post- modern Thought and *Dāna-Pāramitā* in Mahāyāna Buddhism

Mingyi Xiao¹

Abstract

This article delves into the intersection of Western post-modern thought’s “gift debate,” rooted in Marcel Mauss’s work and continued by Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, and Mahāyāna Buddhism’s practice of *dāna* (almsgiving). Examining parallels, the paper identifies resonances in two dimensions. Firstly, in the realm of truth, the wisdom of “three-fold emptiness” in Madhyamaka Buddhism offers insights into the paradoxical nature of the gift, reconciling Derrida’s scarcity and Marion’s abundance perspectives. Secondly, ethically, the emphasis on the “other” in the gift prompts reflection on *dāna*’s motives, deepening our understanding of self-other relationships in Buddhism. This exploration seeks to facilitate a comparative dialogue

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between postmodern thought and Mahāyāna Buddhism, unraveling philosophical, ethical, and religious dimensions within the act of giving.

Introduction

Since French sociologist Marcel Mauss's masterpiece *The Gift* (1924) revealed how gift exchange plays a crucial role in the religious, legal, moral, and economic operations in archaic societies, the "gift" has become an influential problem in Western academic discourse. Mauss's work not only served as a paradigm for the subsequent sociology and anthropology, but also anticipated, in an unexpected way, the formation of the "gift debate" in French postmodern thought. This discussion on the gift is reflected in the work of Jacques Derrida in the 1990s, in *Donner le temps 1* (1991), and *Donner la mort* (1999). Later, in *Étant donné* (1997), Jean-Luc Marion offers a tit-for-tat critique of Derrida's concept of the gift and attempts to construct a "phenomenology of the gift" based on the new perspective of "giving" (*donation*). Both in their writings and in face-to-face encounters at academic conferences,² Derrida and Marion have presented very different portrayals of the gift from their respective standpoints, making the issue of the gift go beyond an empirical social fact and into the center of philosophical and religious trends such as deconstructionism and phenomenology, messianism and Christian theology.

Noteworthy, some crucial points in the gift debate find their echo in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The practice of *dāna*, meaning almsgiving and offering, is an essential doctrine in the formation of the bodhisattva, the

² The conference was held at Villanova University, on September 25-27, 1997, where Derrida and Marion had a discussion about the "gift" problem. Their reports and debates are included in Caputo and Scanlon (1999).

ideal figure in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Previous scholarly works have illuminated the convergences and disparities between Postmodernist and Buddhist ethics. Noteworthy contributions include Douglas L. Berger's exploration, "Deconstruction, Aporia, and Justice in Nāgārjuna's Empty Ethics" (2007), within the edited volume *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought*, which examines the economy of gift through the lens of justice and law. Similarly, Jin Y. Park's monograph, *Buddhism and Postmodernity* (2008), embarks on a project exploring Buddhist-Postmodern ethics. Both Berger and Park underscore a shared inclination in Postmodernism and Buddhism to challenge or "deconstruct" moral dualism, transcending normative ethics while grappling with the query of "immoralism." The previous scholars' discussions provide a fertile ground for the exploration of my paper, which undertakes a comparative analysis of the gift debate in French postmodern thought and *dāna-pāramitā* in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Developing from a specific entry point, my paper aims to pave the way for subsequent exploration of the intercultural resonance between these two philosophical traditions.

My paper conducts this comparative analysis by first characterizing the contrasting images of the gift in the French postmodern debate. While Derrida concludes that the true gift should be non-present, Marion, in contrast, argues that the possibility of the gift lies in the saturation and excess of its presence. Secondly, my paper delineates the shift from *dāna* to *dāna-pāramitā* in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism, highlighting the doctrines of emptiness and dependent co-arising in the almsgiving practice. The paper then compares the French postmodern "gift" and Buddhist *dāna-pāramitā* in two dimensions. (1) In the dimension of truth, I argue that the truth of emptiness contained in *dāna-pāramitā* can illuminate the fundamental difficulties in the postmodern gift debate. The wisdom of the "three-fold emptiness"—the emptiness of the giver, the recipient, and the gift (*sanlun tikong* 三輪體空), particularly represented in Madhyamaka—provides a possible solution to the paradoxical possibility

of the gift, and also the antinomy between Derrida's scarcity and Marion's abundance interpretation of the gift. (2) In the dimension of ethics, I argue that the priority of the "other" (*l'autre*) revealed by the gift reminds us to emphasize the motives behind the act of *dāna* and further deepen our understanding of the relationship between the self and the other in Buddhism. The interplay between the gift and *dāna*, from a specific point of penetration, opens up a comparison and exchange between postmodern thought and Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The Gift: Derrida's Scarcity and Marion's Abundance

In Mauss's sociological work, the seemingly voluntary gift-giving and gift-receiving in archaic societies are shown to be conditioned by strict rules, and the cycling gift system constitutes the society itself. However, both Derrida and Marion criticize Mauss, for the true gift can only be possible when it is outside the economic cycle of exchange.

Derrida notes in *Given Time I* that "if the image of the circle is essential to the economy, the gift must remain *anéconomique*" (19). The gift is the interruption and the annulling of the economic cycle. At first sight, the gift consists simply of three elements: the giver (*donateur*) gives the gift (*don*) to the recipient (*donataire*). However, this everyday definition of the gift does not satisfy its real conditions. For as soon as the recipient realizes that he or she is receiving a gift, or as soon as the giver realizes that he or she is giving a gift, a certain minimum of gratitude or narcissistic self-affirmation is inevitable, which makes the gift no longer a gratuitous, no-return gift, but once again fall into an economic cycle of exchange. In other words, as long as the gift is present, it will be *understood* as a gift, which leads to the impossibility of escaping the result of self-cancellation and self-deconstruction. However, Derrida's analysis does not aim to show that the gift is impossible; rather, it attempts to analyze

a special kind of existence of the gift through giving, without being present and recognized. The pure gift is “impossible but thinkable” (22).

Marion argues in *Being Given* that Derrida’s “impossibility of the gift” is precisely where the possibility of pure giving lies, a possibility that is revealed through three “suspensions” (ἐποχή), which aim to stop the three elements of the gift from working. The suspensions of the gift consist of (1) the suspension of the giver (for example, when the recipient receives an inheritance, it is impossible to reciprocate it because the giver is dead); (2) the suspension of the recipient (such as in the case of giving through a charity, where the giver does not know the specific recipient and therefore cannot expect to receive a gift from the recipient in return); and (3) the suspension of the gift itself (a gift such as a wedding ring does not imply an exchange of goods, but rather points to the establishment of the marriage; or the crown in the ceremony of coronation is the symbol implying a transfer of power) (126-151).

Marion not only considers the gift as merely possible but also as a “saturated phenomenon” (*le phénomène saturé*), which even forms the foundation for other phenomena. If the gift is invisible, it is not because, as Derrida puts it, the gift is “impossible but thinkable,” but because it is overflowing and excessive; it is the dizziness caused by the pure light that caused this invisibility. Following Kant, Marion portrays the gift as a “saturated phenomenon” in four categories: (1) invisible in quantity; (2) insupportable in quality; (3) absolute in relation; and (4) irregardable in modality. Whereas Kant's theory of category describes the conformity of the object to the subject's understanding, according to Marion, the subject cannot construct the object by gazing at it but is instead constructed by the gaze of the object, which is the opposite of experience—*contre-expérience* (290-300). The gift can violently break out of the operation of the economic cycle only by abundance and excess, by jumping out of the causal chain of sufficient reason in traditional metaphysics.

In Derrida's view, Marion's abundant gift is necessarily present (*présent*), which is the cancellation of the gift. In Marion's view, Derrida concludes that the gift is impossible only from the point of view of traditional metaphysics, while the possibility of the gift lies precisely in the opening of the new perspective—giving. The debate over the “gift” cannot reach a final result because the starting points and intentions of the two thinkers are different. For Derrida, the impossibility of the gift is not an absolute negation, but the opening of an undecidable space, a possibility of free “play” (*jeu*) between giving and receiving. *Given Time I* therefore still presents a gift in the literary sense through the analysis of Charles Pierre Baudelaire's text *La Fausse Monnaie*. Marion's “gift,” on the other hand, can be seen as an attempt to forge a “new phenomenology” through theology: the revelation of God provides the prototype for the gift in its pure sense. This revelation/gift can be depicted as the experience *par excellence*.

Dāna and Dāna-Pāramitā

The Sanskrit verbal root *dā* means to give, to resign, to give up, etc. *Dāna*, derived from this root, means giving, presenting, offering, etc. (Macdonell 118). Early Buddhist texts understand *dāna* as the act of giving property to others in order to obtain the result of good fortune in the future. These texts particularly emphasize the benefits to the giver and explain the importance of the act of giving from the perspective of the “Gate of Merit” (*fude men* 福德門): giving is a means for the practitioner to overcome his or her own greed and stinginess, and also to gain greater rewards. For example, in the *Madhyama Āgama*, it is said that “if one gives alms, one will quickly cultivate good karma” (T01, no. 26, p.623c14) and in the *Dirgha Āgama*, it is said that “if one gives alms without being greedy, one's life span will be extended to five thousand years” (T01, no. 1, p. 41c6).

From the perspective of the “Gate of Merit,” the logic of giving is to give one’s possessions to others in exchange for greater benefits in the future. However, according to Mahāyāna Buddhism, this seemingly clear logic is not sufficient to highlight the specificity of Buddhist giving, because there are also acts of mundane altruistic giving,³ or what the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* (大智度論) calls “mundane *dāna*” (*shijian tan* 世間檀). To give alms for the sake of gaining some kind of benefit is no different from mundane *dāna*. Only pure almsgiving that recognizes the reality of the emptiness (*śūnyatā*) of the giver, the recipient, and the gift is true almsgiving in the Buddhist sense—*dāna* out of this world, or transcendental *dāna* (*chushijian tan* 出世間檀). The difference between mundane *dāna* and transcendental *dāna* lies in whether one understands ultimate reality:

People think there are existents which in fact are not real; this is mundane *dāna*. If one’s mind is free of the three-fold hindrances [giver, recipient, and gift], if one knows the reality of the *dharmā*, and if one’s mind is not perverse, then this is transcendental *dāna*. Transcendental *dāna* is praised by the sages, and mundane *dāna* is not praised by the sages. (T25, no. 1509, p. 142b3)

The logic of giving is thus reversed: giving is no longer for the sake of one’s own benefit, but for the sake of truly benefiting all sentient beings

³ The virtue of giving had long been praised in the Chinese tradition before the import of Buddhism. However, the idea of giving in Buddhism differs from the views of Confucianism and Mohism. See Yin Shun’s comparison on this point in “Three Essentials of Buddhist Studies” (81-85).

(*sattva*), after realizing the truth of nonexistence and non-nonexistence and completely abandoning the calculation of one's gain and loss.⁴

Mahāyāna Buddhism regards the understanding and practice of almsgiving in earlier phases as insufficient, demanding a transformation from the vision of the “Gate of Merit” to the “Gate of Wisdom” (*zhihui men* 智慧門).⁵ Additionally, the ordinary sense of *dāna* is transformed into a more specific *dāna-pāramitā*. *Pāramitā* means “perfection,” “gone beyond,” or “gone to the other side,” a virtue or quality developed and practiced by a bodhisattva on the path to becoming a Buddha (Buswell and Lopez 624). The term *dāna-pāramitā* is thus a combination of the act of *dāna* and the wisdom of *pāramitā*.

The transition from *dāna* to *dāna-pāramitā* lies in three factors, as follows. (1) The presence or absence of wisdom. *Dāna-pāramitā* is based on the truth that the giver, the recipient, and the gift are all nonexistent and unreal, so that one can go beyond the calculations of gain and loss to achieve true nonrewarding and pure transcendental giving. (2) Whether or not the act of compassion is complete. *Dāna-pāramitā* emphasizes that only the bodhisattva's ultimate compassionate action can reach the infinite other side, whereas mundane giving is only finite, limited within the countable economy. (3) The prominence of bodhisattva conduct. The term *pāramitā* refers specifically to the great deeds of the bodhisattva, and *dāna-pāramitā* is the first of the six bodhisattva practices (*ṣaḍ-pāramitā*). Mahāyāna Buddhism highlights the continuous act of giving alms as intrinsic to the bodhisattva path, distinguishing it from Theravāda Buddhism.

⁴ Though the law of excluded middle in formal logic demands that for every proposition, either the proposition or its negation is true ($P \vee \neg P$), in Mahāyāna Buddhism the logic is rather a “two-fold negation,” that is, not- P and not not- P ($\neg P \wedge \neg \neg P$), like “non-being and non-nothingness” (非有非無). See Ng, *Concept 24*.

⁵ This distinction between the “Gate of Merit” and the “Gate of Wisdom” is from *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* (T25, no. 1509, p. 172b11).

Whereas Theravāda Buddhism aspires to the status of *arahant*, seeking liberation from the cycle of birth and death, Mahāyāna Buddhism critiques this goal as self-oriented, focusing solely on personal emancipation without addressing the suffering of other sentient beings. In contrast, Mahāyāna aspires to the path of the bodhisattva, who vows to save all sentient beings, foregoing personal *nirvāṇa* to alleviate the suffering of others.

The transition from the “Gate of Merit” to the “Gate of Wisdom” marks a shift from the conventional practice of *dāna* in early Buddhism to the highly conceptualized notion of *dāna-pāramitā* in Mahāyāna. In this progression, almsgiving is no longer performed to obtain the rewards of bliss from the cycle of karma. This transformation and breakthrough is similar to what Derrida and Marion observed about the interruption of the economy by the gift, breaking the cycle of expenditure and income through some kind of *abnormal* giving.

From Dāna-Pāramitā to Gift: Being, Nothingness, and Emptiness

“Gift” and *dāna* seem to be ordinary phenomena in empirical life, but they have become a real “problem” under the view of French postmodern thought and Mahāyāna Buddhism. For French postmodern thinkers such as Derrida and Marion, the gift is more than giving and receiving but must somehow break out of the economic cycle to prevent it from being recognized as a gift. On the other hand, *dāna* is also more than almsgiving and charity; Mahāyāna Buddhism's *dāna-pāramitā* requires combining this ethical practice with the wisdom of emptiness to achieve truly pure transcendental giving. When the gift and *dāna* meet, this fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) makes possible dialogue between the two thinking traditions. The first direction of this dialogue is to revisit the question of the gift from the point of view of *dāna* and to respond to the paradox of the gift with the truth of the emptiness in *dāna-pāramitā*.

A central difficulty in the gift debate lies in Derrida's particular emphasis on the "impossibility of the gift." A pure gift cannot be given back in any sense, and even the awareness of the existence of the gift by the giver or the recipient leads to the self-cancellation of the gift. Although Marion posed three suspensions as the solution to the problem, there is every reason to think that this suspension is still incomplete in Derrida's view. For example, in the suspension of the giver, when the recipient receives an inheritance, even if the recipient cannot directly repay the deceased giver, the gratitude that arises within the recipient will make the gift of the inheritance rewarding and thus no longer pure. Similarly, in the suspension of the recipient, when the giver makes a donation through a charity, although the giver does not know who will benefit ultimately, he may still, at the moment of completing the donation, produce a more or less narcissistic sense of moral superiority. As John D. Caputo concludes, Marion's suspensions are ultimately "partial blackouts" that can only suspend one or two elements of the giver, the recipient, and the gift, but not all three at the same time. Further, "the gifts Marion describes must necessarily retain *some measure* of consciousness, identifiability, phenomenality, and manifestness, which are poison to the gift for Derrida" (Caputo and Scanlon 210).

One of Derrida's own answers to the aporia of the gift resides in forgetting (*l'oublie*). The giver or the recipient must completely forget the gift at the very moment of giving or receiving it, a forgetfulness that transcends the Freudian psychological categories of forgetting and repression. The gift is not an entity, but an experience of "trace" or "cinder" (*cendre*), an experience in constant *différance*. Derrida sums it up thus:

This *forgetting of the gift* cannot be a simple non-experience. . . . For there to be a gift event (we say event and not act), something must come about or happen, in an instant, that no doubt does not belong to the economy of time, in a

time without time, in such a way that this forgetting, without being something present, presentable, determinable, sensible or meaningful, is not nothing. (*Temps* 30)

Derrida points out that forgetting is the condition of the gift, and reciprocally the gift is the condition of forgetting. Forgetting is not the same as non-experience or nothingness, but a particular way of experiencing: the moment of emergence of the gift must be simultaneously the moment of erasure of presence, determination, sense, and meaning.⁶

However, we can still question whether Derrida's "forgetting" can really satisfy the strict conditions he sets for the gift. Forgetting allows the gift to be excluded from the realm of memory and consciousness, but not to fall into complete nothingness. But isn't this function of "forgetting" precisely to preserve a *minimum* of presence, determination, sense, and meaning? Or is it precisely because the gift was once present and recognized by the subject, however shortly, that it subsequently needed to be "forgotten"? If such an analysis is valid, then "forgetting" seems to be merely a delayed effacement that occurs after the event of the gift and cannot reach a "time without time" or deny that the gift was ever present.

Derrida's demand for the purity of the gift appears similarly in Mahāyāna Buddhism's *dāna-pāramitā*. Buddhism distinguishes between mundane and transcendental *dāna* in the criterion of "purity." In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, it is said that even if a bodhisattva can be a great giver and give what sentient beings want, if he thinks in his heart, "I give

⁶Derrida's emphasis on "forgetting" here is similar to Zhuangzi's "sit down and forget" (坐忘). In "The Great and Venerable Teacher," Zhuangzi defines this kind of forgetting by referring to the dialogue between Confucius and Yan Hui: "I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything" (Watson 87). What is needed to attain the true Tao is not active awareness, but forgetfulness and loss.

and receive, I am the giver, I am not greedy, I give up everything according to the Buddhist doctrine of giving, I practice *dāna-pāramitā*” (T07, no. 220, p. 130c23), then this is still the mundane *dāna*. This criterion of measuring mundane and transcendental *dāna* by “purity” is very similar to the criterion proposed by Derrida: the giver here has already achieved the goal of not giving for his own welfare, but only because he “realizes” that he is the giver, that the practice of *dāna* is taking place, the act of giving cancels and deconstructs itself. Truly transcendental *dāna* requires the “three-fold purity” or the “three-fold emptiness” as stated in the *Commentary on the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* (金剛般若波羅蜜多經註解, T33, no. 1703, p. 229b19). The so-called three-fold emptiness means the elimination of the appearance (*lakṣaṇa*) of the giver, the recipient, and the gift, to practice *dāna* without appearance.

However, both *dāna* and the gift concern acts of giving something to a recipient by a giver. How can giving and gifts be established if there are no three terms: the giver, the recipient, and the gift? How does the three-fold emptiness not directly lead to the cancellation of giving?

Specifically, the “emptiness” in the three-fold emptiness is not simply nothing, but “no intrinsic nature” (*asvabhāva*). According to the understanding of Buddhism, everything is characterized by dependent co-arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*), which states that existents cannot arise on their own but must depend on other things to appear or be destroyed. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* of Nāgārjuna analyzes in detail why given things, giving, and receiving are empty and unattainable. (1) Given things are unattainable. Nāgārjuna takes felt as an example. It is commonly believed that felt exists as an object of giving, firstly, because if there is the *name* of felt, then there is the *reality* of felt, and the name should be equal to the reality. Secondly, because the felt has long, short, colorful, and other appearances, people also have all kinds of attitudes toward these appearances, namely happy because of the gain and sad because of the loss. The

rebuttal of these two aspects is that, firstly, both the felt and other named realities are dependent on other causalities and elements, and therefore are existences of *pratītya-samutpāda*; they only have names but no reality.⁷ Secondly, one's state of mind can also change with something that is not real, and the existence of the felt cannot be inferred from the mind's arising. (2) The giver is unattainable. The denial of the giver is not the cancellation of the initiation of the act of giving, but the denial of the attachment to the identity of the giver, especially to the "I." The key to the nonreality of the giver is the nonreality of the stability and fixation of "I," which has various names but no reality ("giver, recipient, sufferer, enjoyer, animal, and so forth") (T25, no. 1509, p. 148a28). The "I" is the effect of the cooperation of the six senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and is therefore an existence depending on others that has no intrinsic nature. (3) The recipient is unattainable. The separation between the giver and the recipient is rooted in self-grasping and self-attachment (*ātma-grāha*). Through the wisdom of emptiness, this self-attachment could be eliminated as an error, and also the separation would disappear (T25, no. 1509, p. 150a15).

The above analysis reveals from the negative perspective how the three-fold emptiness can ensure the purity and intactness of giving, but this is only the manifestation of emptiness in the aspect of "nothingness" (*wu* 無). The other side of emptiness is the infinite, unbelievable, and positive "being" (*you* 有). The giver, the gift, and the recipient in *dāna* are all empty and unattainable, but at the same time, the act of giving and its effects are infinite and boundless. The categories of "being" and "nothingness" are only apparently opposed to each other; emptiness can transcend the antinomy of being and nothingness and encompasses being and nothingness within itself. Not only are being and nothingness not

⁷ Regarding the ontological status that Nāgārjuna gives to the designative names, see Yao 2021.

opposites, but they are also interdependent and mutually premised: only by giving with “nothing” in appearance and in concern can we break through the limited economic cycle and reach the limitless “being”; also, the infinite given things or infinite sentient beings in *dāna* are in fact “nothingness,” which means, without intrinsic nature. This logical transition between “nothingness” and “being” is reflected in the scriptures, such as in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, which states:

That is inexhaustible, so it is called *dāna-pāramitā*. Why? The giver knows that what he gives is after all empty, like the appearance of *nirvāṇa*, and gives to all sentient beings with this mind so that the effect is inexhaustible and is called *dāna-pāramitā*. . . . Furthermore, a bodhisattva gives for the sake of all sentient beings. Since the number of sentient beings is endless, the act of giving is also endless. Additionally, a bodhisattva gives for the sake of the Dharma. Since the Dharma is boundless and infinite, the act of giving is also boundless and infinite. (T25, no. 1509, p. 145c14; my emphasis)

This passage illustrates how the truth of emptiness necessarily includes the dimensions of “being” and “nothingness,” causing the effect of *dāna-pāramitā* to transcend finitude. Furthermore, the truth of emptiness also breaks away from the linear understanding of the almsgiving practice. While *dāna* is conventionally described with three elements—the giver, the gift, and the recipient—characterizing the linear causality from giving to receiving, the doctrines of dependent co-arising and emptiness reveal that this distinction of the three elements and the linear process is merely an imprecise construction of ordinary language. Dependent co-arising suggests that the existence of the giver, the gift, and the recipient each already presupposes the existence of the other two. The unidirectional understanding of giving is paradoxically reversed from the perspective of

dependent co-arising: the giver is not superior to, nor logically or temporally prior to, the recipient; rather, the giver depends on the recipient. As shown in the quoted passage, the bodhisattva's giving is *determined* by sentient beings. Because sentient beings are endless, the bodhisattva's *dāna-pāramitā* is also endless. This inversion of the giver-receiver relationship is further discussed in the subsequent section on "self and other."

The truth of the three-fold emptiness in *dāna-pāramitā* can respond to the problem of the gift in postmodern thought on two levels. First, *dāna-pāramitā* offers a possible answer to Derrida's "impossible possibility." Derrida insists on the purity of the gift, erasing its presence and meaning by a radical forgetting, but this forgetting itself seems to us only an *ex post facto* or a delayed negation. In contrast to Derrida's "forgetting," the three-fold emptiness in *dāna-pāramitā* aims at a *positive* and more profound understanding of the nature of the giver, the recipient, and the gift. Through the grasping of the truth of dependent co-arising, the attitude of attachment will be effaced. Since the three are themselves depending on other causalities and cannot determine themselves, there is no need to deny them, like bringing owls to Athens. In other words, the presence and existence of the gift that Derrida rejects can still be preserved in *dāna-pāramitā*, because it is only a thought construction, or designation (*prajñapti*), not real in itself, and does not need to be denied. Derrida's "forgetting" cannot truly satisfy his demand for the purity of the gift; instead, the three-fold emptiness of *dāna-pāramitā* has the potential to become a true "impossible possibility" that exposes the interdependence and simultaneous establishment of categories originally understood as opposites.

Second, *dāna-pāramitā* can also provide a way of understanding the debate between Derrida and Marion. The antinomy of "nothingness" and "being" is one of the central differences between Derrida and Marion, and their positions can be summarized as follows: Derrida argues for the minimal existence infinitely approaching nothingness, whereas Marion posits

the infinite overflow of existence approaching the unknowable nothingness. In the vision of *dāna-pāramitā*, these two approaches are compatible, and even necessarily demanded at the same time. It is exactly because pure giving can penetrate the empty nature of the giver, the recipient, and the gift that it can break through the finite, apparent giving and advance into infinite, inconceivable giving. The contradiction between Derrida and Marion is not irreconcilable. When the purity of the gift is truly satisfied, when the gift is free from the calculation of gain and loss, such a gift will instead be excessive, even infinite.

From Gift to *Dāna-Pāramitā*: Self and Other, Truth and Ethics

The analysis in the previous section attempts to reconceptualize the “being” and “nothingness” arguments in the gift debate from the perspective of the three-fold emptiness of *dāna-pāramitā*. However, the above discussion only responds to the question of the possibility of the gift or *dāna*, which means it only ensures that the concepts of gift or *dāna* are not logically self-contradictory, but do not lead to the necessity and reality of them. The act of giving gifts and performing *dāna* is possible, but why is it necessary to give and why is it even necessary to discuss the issue of gifts? These questions require us to move from a theoretical analysis of possibilities to a discussion of the ethical and practical motivation from the perspective of the “other” opened by the gift and extend this discussion into the case of *dāna-pāramitā*.

Derrida’s and Marion’s discussions go beyond a mere analysis of the possibility of the gift, and also have a strong ethical connotation: the gift is a kind of ethical practice which emerges inevitably from the “call” (*l’appel*) of the absolute other. From this perspective, both Derrida’s and Marion’s reflections can be included in the genealogy of the “ethical turn” initiated by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas rejects Martin Heidegger’s

thinking of Being as the task of philosophy, condemns Heidegger's philosophy for suppressing otherness with sameness and sensitive human beings with Dasein, and demands that Heidegger's ontology be replaced by metaphysics—the desire and openness toward otherness, which makes metaphysics a synonym of ethics (36). The absolute other is foreign, invisible, agnostic to me, but I can hear the call of the other, to become whom I am by responding (*répondre*) to this call (as Abraham did to God—“Here I am”). The moment of this response is the moment when the “subject” is born.

In Marion's case, the call is equal to the gift as a saturated phenomenon (369-373). The anonymity of the call protects the other from the presence, while at the same time the call, like a gift, is always *already* given, even before the “I” arrives. The “I” emerges as a response to this call and becomes aware of the supreme Goodness in this call, Goodness rather than Being is the true characterization of God. Derrida also emphasizes the essential connection between the gift and the voice of the other: the gift should be invisible to avoid its own cancellation, and all concrete, tangible things remain “invisible in the order of visibility” (*Temps* 124) even if they are hidden, while the “absolute invisibility” belongs only to things outside the realm of vision, for example, sound, music, acoustics, and speech. The “I” must listen to the call of the invisible and is forced to accept this gift; in turn, this call commands the “I” to give, “to establish the responsibility to give its own death (*se-donner-la-mort*) or to offer its death (*offrir sa mort*), that is, to offer its life (*sa vie*)” (*Temps* 73). The problem of the gift lies not only in the *possibility* of it but also in the *necessity* of the gift as a “call” for giving. The gift comes in the form of a call, and the subject, after receiving the call, must completely give itself—his life and death—to the other. The call constitutes an imperative and a motive for the subject to give.

Further, in the context of Levinas, Derrida, and Marion, the other is not in the ordinary sense, but points to God to some extent, be it

Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. The subject has an essential “creatureliness” before this absolute other, on the one hand absolutely distinguished from God as the creator, and on the other hand absolutely dependent on God for its survival (Levinas 106). However, this definition of the other inevitably leads to an inherent contradiction in ethical practice. Derrida points out that both God and neighbors in the context of Levinas belong to the other, but these are two kinds of other with different claims and responding to the voice of one other means ignoring and sacrificing the other others. Even within the other, there are groups with different interests and individuals with different thoughts, and we can only respond selectively to the other’s call. This is where Derrida sees the paradox of the ethic of the gift: when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, Abraham chose to obey God’s command and betray his loved ones; and in our daily lives, every choice we make is a betrayal of all other fellow human beings who are still suffering. The subject, who is born from receiving the gift of calling, has the capacity to be responsible. But in the face of the specific and even conflicting demands of the plural others, the subject is bound to respond to some at the expense of others and is thus always guilty (Derrida, *Mort* 98).

The dimension of other in the gift reveals: (1) the necessary motivation for ethical practice in response to the calling; and (2) the absolute distinction between the self and the other. From the ethical dimension highlighted by the gift, we can also re-examine the issue of motivation and the self-other relationship in Buddhist *dāna-pāramitā*, which has not been explicitly explored in the original context.

This reconsideration of the motives of giving is crucial, because the previous exposition of the wisdom of emptiness in *dāna-pāramitā* ensures the purity of giving only in a negative way but does not explain the necessity of almsgiving in a positive way. Even the emphasis on emptiness

may constitute a threat to the initiation of the act of giving.⁸ The possible incompatibility of emptiness and giving is reflected in two ways. The first possible incompatibility is conceptual exclusion. The wisdom of emptiness reveals that everything exists as a *pratītya-samutpāda* existence, and thus the three-fold emptiness in giving is possible. However, since the transcendental *dāna* is without any appearances and attachments, why should we practice *dāna* anyway? In other words, the act of not giving at all seems to be more consistent with the realization of emptiness, which will completely assure the purity of the mind. In conclusion, the act of giving is not a necessary requirement of emptiness.

The second possible incompatibility is divergence in reality. The tendency of mutual exclusion between emptiness and giving is not only latent in the concept but also has a concrete manifestation in the history of Buddhism, that is, the divergence between the *arahant* and the *bodhi-sattva*. In Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding, the *arahant* and the *bodhi-sattva* represent two different ideals of practice: the *arahant* has attained the universal truth of emptiness (*sarvajña*) but not the wisdom of a buddha that includes the distinctions of particulars and individuals and all sorts of methods to save the different sentient beings (*sarvathā-jñāna*). However, an *arahant*'s wisdom has matured to the point where he is emancipated from life and death, dwelling forever in the state of *nirvāṇa*. The *bodhi-sattva*, by contrast, seeks more wisdom than the *arahant* and pursues *sarvathā-jñāna* to save others, but this also leads to the difficulty or even impossibility of achieving this ambitious goal. In other words, the *arahant*

⁸ This is also the criticism of Tiantai Buddhism (天台宗) about Madhyamaka. In the view of Tiantai Buddhism, Madhyamaka only reveals the principle of the emptiness of *pratītya-samutpāda* existence, but in addition to emptiness one should also see “non-emptiness” (*bukong* 不空) and “wondrous existence” (*miaoyou* 妙有). Thus, while inheriting some of the core ideas of Madhyamaka, Tiantai Buddhism places greater emphasis on the positive practical aspects of emptiness. For a comparative study between Tiantai Buddhism and Mādhyamika, especially the practical character of Tiantai Buddhism, see Ng T'ien-t'ai.

gives up the infinite task of saving others for the sake of his own emancipation, while the bodhisattva chooses to take on the practice of *dāna* and postpone *nirvāṇa* indefinitely. They represent different interpretations of emptiness and giving (or compassion).

Dāna-pāramitā requires the realization of the wisdom of emptiness, but there is a possible incompatibility between the wisdom of emptiness and the practice of giving. The solution to this problem requires us to further examine the true meanings of giving and emptiness, especially the motivation of the bodhisattva's practice of giving. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, instead of being mutually exclusive with the act of giving and thus dissolving the necessity of giving, emptiness constitutes exactly the motive for giving or compassion. How can this inversion be possible? First of all, the truth of emptiness reveals that the distinction between the self and other is only a phenomenal difference rooted in the attachment to the identity "I," and only by realizing the nonreality of the appearance of "self, others, sentient being, and lifetime" (*wo xiang, ren xiang, zhongsheng xiang, shouzhe xiang* 我相, 人相, 眾生相, 壽者相)⁹ can one become a true bodhisattva.

Secondly, since the "I" and others are one, the nonemancipation of sentient beings is the same as the nonemancipation of myself, and the suffering of sentient beings is the same as the suffering of myself, which is also where the possibility of "one body compassion" (*tongti dabe* 同體大悲) lies—others and I are as if in the same body, sharing the same feelings. In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (維摩經, the main character Vimalakīrti said, "Because all sentient beings are sick, I am sick. . . . Bodhisattvas enter birth and death for the sake of all sentient beings; if there is birth and death, there is sickness" (T14, no. 475, p. 544b21). After realizing the truth of

⁹ These are the "four appearances" (*sixiang* 四相) in the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. "Freedom from the four appearances" (*li sixiang* 離四相) constitutes one of its central themes (T33, no. 1703, p. 236c2-3).

emptiness, the bodhisattva breaks the boundary between self and others, and becomes one with all sentient beings, feeling the suffering and troubles of all sentient beings, thus generating unstoppable, boundless compassion.¹⁰ In short, an *arahant's* wisdom is not complete from the Mahāyāna perspective, since this wisdom is unable to penetrate the true relationship between self and others, and is therefore unable to initiate the unreserved, radical practice of giving. From this observation, truth and practice are aligned, and thorough knowledge gives rise to thorough acts of giving.

This initial answer to the question of motivation in *dāna-pāramitā* requires us to further outline the relationship between self and other embodied in the practice of giving and show its complete logic. Since there is no difference between the bodhisattva and sentient beings, the logical position of the self and the other in *dāna-pāramitā* is reversed in a tricky way: it is no longer that the bodhisattva saves others from an already-emancipated self, but it is the suffering of others that calls for and creates the compassionate bodhisattva. The bodhisattva, as well as his mission to save all beings, cannot exist without the appeal of the other. In addition, the wisdom of the bodhisattva can only be truly achieved after penetrating the impurities and sufferings (*kleśa*) of the world. Like it is said in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*:

The lotus does not grow on the upland plain; the lotus grows in the mud and mire of a damp, low-lying place. In the same way, the Buddha's Law can never grow in a person who has perceived the uncreated nature of reality and entered into correct understanding. It is only when living

¹⁰ With this point, it seems that the Buddhist tradition could also contribute on one hand to the phenomenological discussion of empathy, and on the other hand to the problem of "other minds" in analytic philosophy. The former discussion has already been related to Confucianism by scholars such as Iso Kern (705-732).

beings are in the midst of the mire of earthly desires that they turn to the Buddha's Law. (T14, no. 475, p. 549b6)

According to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the wisdom of an *arahant* can be realized immanently, while the wisdom of a bodhisattva can only be achieved in the total opening to others. As the saying goes, "sufferings are wisdom" and "birth and death are *nirvāṇa*." If there are no sufferings or birth and death, then there is no wisdom or *nirvāṇa*. The relationship between these two ends is not overcoming or sublation, but an immediate equality.¹¹ When the logical position of self and other in *dāna-pāramitā* is reversed and the positive meaning of sentient beings and sufferings is fully revealed, the concrete practice of *dāna-pāramitā* is likewise changed. The practice of *dāna* is no longer top-down giving from the transcendental world, but fully integrated into this world and penetrating all the defilements in it, as stated by Vimalakīrti when he describes, "walking in the path of the non-Buddha way" and at the same time "attaining the truly Buddha way" (T14, no. 475, p. 549a1). Even the appearances of stinginess, anger, slackness, and ignorance can be used as a convenient way to teach and save sentient beings, and it is "unbelievable" (*buke siyi* 不可思議) that one can be liberated while retaining the suffering of this world.

At this point, we can briefly outline the path of rethinking *dāna-pāramitā* from the view of the gift. Derrida and Marion's discussion of the gift is intended to emphasize the priority of ethics over speculation and the priority of the other over the self. Ethics and practice are no longer subordinate domains in philosophical or religious systems but constitute the central impetus for the emergence of a new kind of thinking. Reflecting on *dāna-pāramitā* from the perspective of the other opened by the discussion of the gift, we can see that it is not sufficient to portray *dāna-pāramitā* in terms of the truth of the emptiness, but that it is necessary to

¹¹ This apparent paradox is further developed in the logic of "Soku" or *sive* (ji 即) in the Kyoto School. See Nishitani (97).

introduce the others as sentient beings to explain the necessity of the act of giving and to reveal its true logic. Just as in the gift, it is the call from the other that creates the “I” who is responsible, and thus constitutes the motivation for the self to give; in *dāna-pāramitā*, it is also the suffering and pains of other sentient beings that drive the bodhisattva to develop boundless compassion and to achieve complete and thorough wisdom in the midst of the defilements of the world. Thus, both acts of giving, gift and *dāna*, represent the opening to the other and the centrality of ethical practice in the contemplation of truth.

However, the comparison between the gift and *dāna* also highlights the irreducible differences between the two. (1) The difference between infinite and finite. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, *dāna-pāramitā* opens up the dimension of infinity from the reality of emptiness, and the conversion from ordinary being to bodhisattva signifies giving up finite self-concern and taking up the task of infinite almsgiving. The subject under the vision of the gift, on the other hand, keeping finitude as his essence, can only give in a limited way and cannot escape the aporia in the ethical situation. (2) The difference between fusion and separation. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the bodhisattva constitutes the path from sentient beings to Buddhahood. Further, the bodhisattva and sentient beings are blended in the limitless practice of *dāna*. However, a paradoxical tension must always be maintained in the ethics of the gift, to ensure that the other is not assimilated by the self and that differences are not suppressed by sameness. Our comparison stops provisionally and is content to juxtapose these two fundamental diversities. The next logical link of this dialogue will be an analysis and a choice between finitude and infinitude (for example, is the bodhisattva’s infinitude a kind of variant of the Kantian idea? Is it legitimate to “transgress” the facticity of finitude in the Heideggerian sense?), as well as sameness and otherness (will complete otherness results in the sublimation of the others, which will contradict our communicative

experience in ordinary life, and will it injure a true ethical relation?). These further reflections and discussions are far from the end of the matter.

Conclusion

The gift debate in French postmodern thought is intended to reveal the complexity of the occurrence of phenomena through the specific phenomenon of the gift, and also to emphasize the priority of ethical practice. *Dāna-pāramitā* is found within the Buddhist doctrinal system as the essential practice for the bodhisattva that combines wisdom and compassion. Despite the different contexts in which the gift and *dāna-pāramitā* are situated, we can deepen our understanding of each in comparison to the other, and thus reveal the convergences and divergences between them.

The comparison between the gift and *dāna-pāramitā* takes place on two levels and in two directions. Firstly, the truth of emptiness contained in *dāna-pāramitā* can illuminate the fundamental difficulties in the gift debate, providing a possible solution to the apparent opposition between being and nothingness. Secondly, the distinctive emphasis on otherness and ethics in the gift also reflects the importance of motivation in *dāna-pāramitā* and portrays the positive characters of sentient beings, sufferings, and mundane life. Further, these two dimensions of the dialogue, namely speculative truth and ethical practice, are discovered to be not two separate domains. A thorough understanding of truth can lead to true ethical practice and vice versa.

The dialogue also reveals their irreducible differences. The bodhisattva who practices *dāna-pāramitā* is one with all sentient beings through the practice of giving, and at the same time is one with the Buddha through the pursuit of truth. The gift, however, tends toward the

separation of otherness, where the distinction between self and other, creatures and God, is both absolute and requires a kind of “non-connect connection,” an “impossible possibility,” through the paradoxical giving.

In his argument with Marion, Derrida refers to the concept of the *khôra* from Plato’s *Timaeus*. *Khôra* in Greek means place, location, space, and Derrida derives it as a “foundation without foundation,” a “desert within a desert,” where only in this field of resistance to historicization can a universal dialogue between cultures take place: “European, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and philosophical” (Caputo and Scanlon 76).¹² Although Derrida consciously limits this dialogue to the so-called “religions of the Scripture” (*des religions du Livre*), it is still possible to ask whether this dialogue is possible between the West and the East, between the “other” and the “other” of this other.

Abbreviations

T *Taishoshinshudaizokyo* 大正新脩大藏經

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¹² For a more detailed discussion of the concept of *khôra* by Derrida, see Derrida *Khôra*.

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