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# Ironic Gifts of Death and Life: A Somewhat Fictive Account\*

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## I. Introduction: The Economy of Salvation?

My transit along a transhumanities pathway that transgresses disciplinary borders has been a transformation, not only intellectually, but also personally, as I look back in irony over the journey thus far. I begin a recounting of one phase of this wandering with a transitional moment early in my personal and intellectual awakening, a moment that opened for me those wandering mazes of the mind that lead through the profane and the sacred toward whatever end awaits. As an undergraduate attending Baylor University, a private religious school, I first encountered and was utterly baffled by the profane-to-sacred expression “the economy of salvation.” *Economy?* Wasn’t salvation a *gift*? Didn’t Paul clearly state in Romans 3:24 that as sinners in the sight of God, we are “justified by his grace as a free gift”? So, what could salvation have to do with things like supply and demand, monetary policy, competition, or the labor market?

Surely, the labor market provided no analogy, I thought, since labor meant *work*, and Paul had also explained, in Ephesians 2:8–9, that “By grace, you are saved and not from works, lest anyone should boast.” Even more pertinent was Romans 4:4, which states that “to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due,” which meant that we didn’t need to work for our salvation. There would thus seem to be no labor-market economics to it.

Or was “economy” meant in the sense of “economy car”? As in “economize”? I recalled Mark Twain’s portrayal of a Calvinist God economizing on

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\* The words “Gifts of Death” in my title allude, of course, to Jacques Derrida’s *The Gift of Death*. The Old Testament and New Testament citations are my translations, based on the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft’s Third Improved Edition (1987) of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* and the United Bible Societies’ Fourth Corrected Edition (1993) of the *Greek New Testament*, respectively.

salvation by thinning “the predestined elect down to a company so small as to be hardly worth the saving” (41). This, however, seemed the very opposite of economizing. Fewer elect for the same high price? Moreover, if we were talking about “God personally immolating himself for the debt of man, God paying himself personally out of a pound of his own flesh” (Nietzsche 111; qtd. in Derrida 114), then economizing appeared pointless. Why not pay for everybody’s sins? It wouldn’t cost a penny more.

But, noticing the language of payment in my speculations, I began to reflect upon similar biblical language. In 1 Corinthians 6:20 and 7:23, for example, Paul holds that believers are saved because they “are bought with a price.” I therefore conceded that there was perhaps something to this “economy of salvation” after all.

## II. An Economy of Certain Damnation

There certainly exists scriptural evidence for the flip side, namely, the “economy of damnation,” for we are told that “the wages of sin is death.” With these words in Romans 6:23, Paul implies that we earn our damnation as our pay. Note that he explicitly uses the term “wages [opsōnia].” This seems to return us to the labor market that I had previously dismissed as irrelevant. According to my *Cliffs Quick Review: Economics*, “Workers supply labor . . . in exchange for wages” (Duffy 139). That seems obvious enough. What about the *motivation* for supplying labor? Again from *Cliffs*:

An individual’s supply of labor depends on . . . preferences for two types of “goods”: consumption goods and leisure. Consumption goods include all . . . goods that can be purchased with . . . income . . . earn[ed] from working. Leisure is the good that individuals consume when they are not working. By . . . working more . . . , an individual reduces . . . consumption of leisure but is able to increase . . . purchases of consumption goods. (Duffy 142)

Everybody is thereby always a consumer. Such is our ontological status. We can choose to consume either leisure or consumption goods, but we cannot choose to stop consuming. This seems less than obvious to me, but be that as it may, we *can* derive from this passage a reasonable understanding of the

individual's motivation for supplying labor: namely, desire for consumption goods. For these sorts of goods, we need wages.

There is nevertheless something very odd about this. If "the wages of sin is death," what consumption goods can we possibly purchase using the currency death? Who would accept such money? Nobody. This hardly seems to fit the common neoclassical economists' textbook presentation of money as "a commodity that everyone wants, because everyone knows that everyone else wants it" (Sichel and Eckstein 31). Since hardly anybody wants death, mortality would seem to be more like sin's cost than its wages, but the biblical text specifies wages. If we take Paul's words seriously, then in his soteriological understanding, sin is a "work" (cf. Romans 9:11–12; Colossians 1:21).

This parallels Paul's understanding of human attempts to attain righteousness as "works" (e.g., Romans 3:20 and Galatians 2:16). Consequently, one might expect that the economy of damnation would mirror the economy of salvation. Works of sin earn death as wages; works of righteousness earn life as wages. The parallelism, however, breaks down. Works of righteousness are not paid with life as wages: "For no human being will be justified in...[God's] sight by works of the law" (Romans 3:20). No matter how hard we labor at justifying ourselves through works of the law, we will never earn life as our wages. We remain damned.

Why damned? Why don't works of righteousness bring life? Paul does acknowledge in Galatians 3:12 that "Whoever does the works of the law will live by them." If so, why can't we earn life as our wages? Because, it appears, "Paul believes that... perfect obedience is a practical impossibility, and thus no one can be justified by doing the 'works of Law'" (Schreiner 978). As Paul puts it in Galatians 3:10:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written:  
"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written  
in the Book of the Law."

This presupposes that all those relying upon the law for righteousness have failed to keep the law. This is consistent with Paul's explicit statements that "There is no one who is righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10), "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). In effect, works of righteousness do not receive the wages of life because even a single work of sin receives death as wages. Death trumps life.

### III. A Misgiving of Death

One will doubtless have noticed that despite the above citations from economics textbooks, Paul is certainly not thinking with the concepts used by modern, neoclassical economists—he isn't even using the term “wages” to mean money. By “death” as “wages of sin,” he seems to be thinking more in terms of a barter economy, “a simultaneous exchange of commodities, whether goods or labour services, ... without using money” (Hart 196b). Specifically, Paul appears to be describing “payment in kind.” The works of sin receive death as compensation because the works of sin are works of death. One labors to provide death, so one receives death in return.

Of course, no one would willingly provide a service of labor in exchange for such a good, so the barter economy of damnation that Paul alludes to must remain hidden to those who labor within it. They will not even realize that they are working, and whatever they may think that they are receiving, they will not imagine it as a commodity bartered in exchange for a service but, rather, as a gift for which they have not labored.

The paradigm for this is the first gift, the fruit of the tree in the midst of the Garden of Eden, which purported to offer knowledge of good and evil but which more fundamentally brought death: “[Eve] took from its fruit and ate, and she also gave to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6). Interestingly, this first gift not only brings death but also sets in motion the economy of work. The biblical text has God declare:

By the sweat of your brow, you will eat food until you return to the ground, for you were taken from it, for dust you are and to dust you will return. (Genesis 3:19)

Paul alludes to this first gift in his emphasis upon the gift of grace:

But the gift (of life) is not like the (first) sin, for if the many died through the one man's sin, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ abound for the many. (Romans 5:15)

Paul draws a contrast between the first “gift”—which he refers to not as a gift but as a sin—and the second gift, which is given through grace. Since the gift

of life is free, then the first “gift” is not only no gift of life but really no gift at all. Instead, it is a labor of death repaid with death. In short, an economy of damnation.

#### **IV. Gift-Giving in Gnosticism and John’s Gospel: A Serious, Lengthy, Scholarly Transdisciplinary Excursion...**

This brings me to my own work—if I dare use *that* term—on gifts of life and death in the Gospel of John and Gnostic texts. In a 1999 AAR Comparative-Religions panel that I organized for the Boston Conference, I presented a paper on this topic: “Gift-Giving Across the Sacred-Profane Divide: A Maussian Analysis of Heavenly Versus Earthly Food in Gnosticism and John’s Gospel” (Hodges), which I summarize below.

I began with a contrast between Gnostic substance dualism and Johannine ethical dualism. By substance dualism, I meant Gnosticism’s distinction between inherently good spirit and inherently evil matter. By ethical dualism, I meant the Johannine distinction between good and evil as based upon choices. I then introduced the Maussian understanding of gift-giving. In its positive sense, a Maussian understanding implies (among other things) the reciprocal bonding that gift-giving effects between giver and recipient. In its negative sense, a Maussian understanding implies ambiguity since gifts also serve to separate insiders from outsiders (*Mauss passim*).

Of course, it is obvious that gifts draw borders between those to whom they are offered and those to whom they are not offered. This is not a gift’s ambiguity. Its ambiguity consists in this: Mere acceptance of a gift does not ensure that one becomes an insider. A gift might be a poison gift, one either offered or accepted in deceit. I argued that in Gnosticism, with its substance dualism of good and evil, a gift crossing the sacred-profane divide could be only a poison gift, whereas in John’s Gospel, with its ethical dualism, a gift crossing the sacred-profane divide could act either as a poison gift or as a genuine gift.

I then pointed to some examples of poison gifts in Gnosticism, occasions where Gnostic revealers who have descended from the spiritual realm are offered material nourishment. An alert Gnostic revealer rejects the gift:

They prepare a brew, bring it before me, hold it, and say, “Sir: eat, and drink wine.”... I spoke to them, “Indeed, I have eaten and drunk.”  
(Lidzbarski 161, translated by the author)

But in one case, a revealer is tricked into eating material food and falls into a deep sleep, a Gnostic figure of speech for death:

They perceived that I was not one of them,  
And they mingled with me in their guile.  
Moreover, they made me eat of *their food*.

.....

And by the weight of *their food*,  
I fell into a deep sleep. (Preuschen 35, ll. 31–36, translated by the author)

Interestingly, the Gospel of John shows Jesus explicitly rejecting nourishment in John 4:31–34:

31 In the meantime, the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” 32 But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know.” 33 Therefore, the disciples said to one another, “Surely, no one has brought food to him.” 34 Jesus says to them, “My food is that I might do the will of the one who sent me and (that I might) complete his work.”

Yet, he explicitly requests nourishment in John 19:28–30, the scene of the crucifixion’s final moments:

28 After this, Jesus—knowing that everything had now been completed—in order that scripture might be fulfilled, says, “I am thirsty.” 29 A jar was standing (there) full of vinegar. Thus having put a sponge full of the vinegar on a hyssop, they brought (it) to his mouth. 30 Then, when Jesus received the vinegar, he said, “It has been completed,” and bowing (his) head, he handed over the spirit.

In John 4:31–34, Jesus resembles the alert Gnostic revealer in declining food;

in John 19:28–30, he resembles the tricked Gnostic revealer in accepting nourishment and dying. The resemblances, however, are superficial for two reasons. First, by resembling *both* the alert revealer and the tricked revealer, Jesus actually resembles neither. Second, and more significantly, Jesus *willingly* accepts the vinegar during his crucifixion, unlike the tricked revealer.

Why does Jesus do this? Why does he reject nourishment in 4:31–34 but accept it in 19:28–30? The answer, I think, is that his acceptance of nourishment must coincide with the crucifixion. Why? Because worldly nourishment in a fallen world can only bring death, and Jesus has to die. His death, however, has to mean something. What does it mean? Recall from John 4:34 that Jesus's food is to do the will and complete the work of the one who sent him, then note in John 19:28 that Jesus has now completed all that he was intended to do except for one last act requisite for him to fulfill scripture, namely, proclaiming his thirst and accepting the vinegar (John 19:29–30). This means that Jesus is simultaneously receiving profane and sacred nourishment.

Why would the mixing of the sacred and the profane be a good thing? Well, it wouldn't be good in Gnostic systems, but it can be good in Johannine thought. Recall that biblical thinking distinguishes among the sacred and the common (i.e., the profane) and the impure and the pure (cf. Leviticus 10:10). In my understanding, the common is the intrinsically pure substance of the world, and the sacred and the impure are forces locked in dynamic opposition to one another. Their opposition manifests itself in conflict over the realm of the common, with both forces seeking to extend their influence and control over it (cf. Milgrom 732).

Early Christians, however, seem to have used the terms “common” and “impure” as synonyms (cf. Toombs 663b; Untergassmair 302b). This suggests that they understood the impure as having completely extended its influence and control over the entirety of the common. If so, then the boundary between the sacred and the profane (i.e., the common) that the Johannine redeemer must cross has become a border between the sacred and the impure. This border, however, is a moveable one, for the force of the impure can be pushed back, and the common realm can regain its normal state of purity and even come to be imbued by the power of the sacred.

This, I argue, is what the Johannine Jesus is doing when he accepts the vinegar, for by taking the impurity of the world into himself, he internalizes the conflict between the sacred and the impure in a way that determines the

defeat of the impure and its purging from the realm of the common. He can win because he has been sanctified by God prior to coming into the world (John 10:36), because he is the sacred one of God acting in the world (John 6:69), and because he is constantly receiving sacred power from God (John 4:34; *Ibid.* 19:28). In other words, the Johannine Jesus is a being of extraordinary sacredness, which means that he is a being of extraordinarily potent spiritual force (cf. Hodges and Poirier 151–84).

This power also enables Jesus to offer spiritual sustenance to the world. Two great miracles of nourishment occur in John's Gospel: the wine miracle at Cana (John 2:1–11) and the bread miracle on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (John 6:1–14). The latter miracle—and very likely the former, too—receives an interpretive gloss in John 6:51–58, probably not an insertion but original to the author (cf. Ruckstuhl 243–45; *Ibid.* 266), that presents the food and drink that Jesus offers as his flesh and blood, in other words, as the eucharist that provides eternal life. But the eucharist, as true gift, is ambiguous.

In John 13:21–30, Jesus offers his future betrayer a eucharistic morsel (cf. John 6:51c–58; *Ibid.* 13:18; Moloney 139–40), and Judas accepts it, but because Judas has already chosen to stand in the camp of God's adversary (cf. John 13:2), thereby refusing the bonding of communion with the sacred and the reciprocal giving of himself to the divine, then the otherwise life-giving gift becomes a poisonous gift. The sacred power, consequently, does not purify and sanctify Judas but, instead, leaves him open to possession by the most impure spirit of all, Satan. Judas's subsequent status as a "son of destruction" (John 17:12; cf. Newman 24a; Zerwick and Grosvenor 337) shows the result of his external acceptance of a gift that he inwardly rejects.

In systems presupposing an ontologically grounded binarism of good and evil as substances, "gift-giving" crossing the boundary between sacred and profane can only serve the ulterior purpose of diminishing or destroying the power of the recipient. In such instances, gift-giving constitutes a zero-sum game that characterizes the extreme limiting case of gift-giving, namely, giving in order to retain the gift and gain control over the recipient without forging bonds of communion. In systems presupposing an ethically grounded binarism of good and evil as moral choices, gift-giving crossing the boundary between the sacred and the profane opens the possibility of drawing the recipient into the life-giving power of the divine. Gift-giving here, rather than being a zero-sum game, characterizes the ideal case of gift-giving, namely,

giving in order to forge bonds of communion and a reciprocity of giving where the sacred gives itself to the profane in order for the profane to give itself to the sacred.

To put a Pauline gloss on this, we reveal a great chiasmic structure: The first, false gift introduced the economy of damnation, but the economy of salvation introduces the final, true gift.

## V. A Sudden, Transgressive Deconstruction!

Then, I encountered Derrida's deconstruction of the "economy of the gift" in *The Gift of Death* and discovered that all my structural-functional constructions concerning the role of gift-giving in connecting and separating "one" and "an-other" were part of a dubious enterprise. Let me quote Derrida on this point:

There is a structural disproportion or dissymmetry between the finite and responsible mortal on the one hand and the goodness of the infinite gift on the other hand. (51)

This would seem to fit with reserving the category of "the quality of the wholly other, in other words the infinite other, for God" alone (Ibid. 83).

Now, one might attempt to sacrifice others from among the "every other" (Derrida 83) to the other who is infinitely other in the manner of Abraham sacrificing Isaac (Genesis 22:1-18), Jephthah sacrificing his daughter (Judges 11:29-40), Samson sacrificing the Philistines (Judges 16:23-30), or al-Qaida sacrificing the World Trade Center workers (CBS News Nr. 13). One might even try to sweeten the gift by offering oneself along with the victims—as Samson and the al-Qaida martyrs perhaps did (CBS News Nr. 7).

Would any of these gifts be pleasing to a God who is infinitely other? Such a God is inscrutable, so how would we know? As Derrida points out, between us and such a hidden God, there is

an absolute dissymmetry. It is all that suffices to provoke the *mysterium tremendum*, inscribing itself within the order of the gaze. God sees me, he looks into me in secret, but I don't see him, I don't see him looking at me. (91)

Before such a God, especially one who has provided an infinite gift, we have nothing to offer in return except our fear and trembling—and even that could never be enough. With such a God, there could never be *any* reciprocity, never *any* economy of gift-giving:

I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift. (Ibid. 51; cf. Aulén 95–97)

Thus, my structural–functionalist construction of a divine–human reciprocity falls victim to a Derridaean deconstruction.

## VI. A Transitional Derridaean Reconstruction: “Clearly...”

Now, I feel a bit like the good reverend in David Lodge’s *Small World*, who has summarized the opposition’s arguments in a plenary address and has nothing more to say beyond the following elliptical remark:

The question is, therefore, how can literary criticism maintain its Arnoldian function of identifying the best which has been thought and said, when literary discourse itself has been decentred by deconstructing the traditional concept of the author, of “authority”? Clearly... (159; cf. 347)

He has nothing more to say because he has been unable to construct a rebuttal beyond “Clearly...” and must stand there embarrassed before the entire assembled conference, wearing a frozen smile and awaiting imminent disgrace...

Yes. “Clearly” disgraced, fallen, unsaved, damned... except that by grace of a rumor suddenly sweeping through the conference like the rush of a violent wind—“Legionnaire’s Disease!”—the good reverend’s listeners panic and abandon the premises (Lodge 347). But... I don’t expect that sudden, undeserved grace. I have to construct a rebuttal. Or do I? No, I don’t. Derrida already has because he doesn’t conceive of God as infinitely other. Nor does he consider God inaccessible:

God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior. Once such a structure of conscience exists, of being-with-oneself, of speaking, that is, of producing invisible sense, once I have within me, *thanks to the invisible word as such*, a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore *at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself*, once I can have a secret relationship with myself and not tell everything, once there is secrecy and secret witnessing within me, then what I call God exists, (there is) what I call God in me, (it happens that) I call myself God—a phrase that is difficult to distinguish from “God calls me,” for it is on that condition that I can call myself or that I am called in secret, God is in me, he is the absolute “me” or “self;” he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard’s sense, subjectivity. (108–09)

The term “God,” then, serves as metaphor for a special kind of radically inner subjectivity.

Such a God is not only *not* wholly other but is in truth wholly inner. Is this the secret God of the history of European responsibility (Derrida 1–34)? Perhaps. That is Derrida’s question, but it is not mine. Let me instead project this inner God back out to the exterior in sort of counter-Feuerbachian move, conceiving of what William F. Vallicella calls an “external unifier,” such that this unifier is not purely subjective, but extra-mental (157–81). Derrida’s “structure of invisible interiority” *as God* can then become a structure of invisible interiority *as epistemic access* to God. Another expression for this inner structure would be the biblical understanding of humans as constructed in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27).

This returns me to the Johannine and Pauline understandings of the economy of the gift of salvation. Reciprocity with the divine is possible because one can give oneself—made in the image of God—in return. Indeed, by accepting God’s gift of salvation, one necessarily gives oneself to God; otherwise, salvation wouldn’t be salvation (cf. Colossians 1:19–22; Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18). This was part of the thinking behind my construction of Johannine soteriology. I now argue that it lies behind Pauline soteriology as well. Recall Paul’s words of exhortation:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present

your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1; cf. Ibid. 15:15–16; Philippians 2:17)

One is made in the image of God. Therefore, much as the divine image of God, God's Son (Colossians 1:15), sacrificed himself to God, one sacrifices *oneself* to God—but it is a living sacrifice. Perhaps something similar was meant by Jan Patočka, whom Derrida cites:

The surpassing of the everyday takes the form of concern for salvation of the soul, the latter being conquered by means of a moral transformation, by means of a reversal in the face of death and of eternal death, living in anguish and hope that couldn't be more closely allied one with the other, trembling in the consciousness of sin and offering one's whole being in the sacrifice of repentance. (Patočka 117; qtd. in Derrida 94)

Paul, too, advises believers in Philippians 2:12–13 to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure”—which means that “work” here belongs to the economy of gift-giving, not the economy of work.

## VII. Concluding Unscientific Transcript

It appears, then, that even on Derridaean grounds (if I am allowed my counter-Feuerbachian move), I can still hold to my original view concerning the reciprocity of giving between divine and human in the Gospel of John—and even extend this view to Pauline thought, which I hadn't previously considered. Of course, I have scarcely touched upon Derrida's thinking concerning the interrelations of sacrifice, death, and the economy of the gift (10), and certainly not upon their multiple layers of meaning. Nor have I accessed his text through what Roland Barthes would call a “thousand entrances” (35). No, I have entered the text through merely one door. In doing so, perhaps I have changed a writerly text into a readerly text (Barthes 31–32), but I have tried to *work* upon this one small part. Or has my entrance been an exit, and have I applied my labors to an economy of damnation wherein

I *might* publish—yet find that I perish anyway? But that is another transition along this transhumanities path through economics, anthropology, literature, philosophy, and theology.

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## Abstract

In an abrupt, yet hopefully plausible transition using serious playful irony—what the Renaissance thinkers called *serio ludere*, or playful seriousness—in order to transit, trespass, and transgress rigid disciplinary boundaries, as well as difficult, resistant boundaries of various sorts, this brief paper moves abruptly from the secular economics of our contemporary postmodern world through the sacred economy of salvation in the thinking of such varied earlier figures as St. Paul, Mark Twain, and Jean Calvin to such related, if distinct, religious writings of antiquity as the Gospel of John and Gnostic texts on the economy of gift-giving, reflecting upon the relevant Greek terms along the way, and translating from the Hebrew, German, and Syriac, where needed, while also drawing upon the cultural anthropology of Mary Douglas, among other writers on food and drink, and then moving on into the paper’s decentered center, an un-derided jack-of-all-trades Derrida, then out again by means of literary critic David Lodge’s ironically postmodern comedy-of-manners novel *Small World*, to an optimistic conclusion through a counter-Feuerbachian *deus ex machina* move via the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, though with a nod of metaphysical appreciation to the contemporary analytical philosopher William F. Vallicella and his concept of the extramental “external unifier,” all the while dealing with the paradoxical notion of the unreturnable gift that can, after all, be returned, such that reciprocity in divine-human dealings is maintained, with the result that the denouement of my essay dwindles ineluctably off into an indefinite ellipse...

**Keywords:** economy, works, grace, Gnosticism, St. Paul, John’s Gospel, Derrida

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