

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## Enacting Gifts. Performances on Par with Art Experiences

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**Abstract:** Given the coterie of philosophers focused on everyday aesthetics, it's fascinating that gift reception has heretofore managed to escape their scrutiny. To enact a gift, recipients begin by imagining its use. Enacting a gift is thus a kind of *performance*, whose value depends on the donee's interpretation, just as exhibitions, concerts, staged plays or books are performances of visual art, scores, scripts or texts, whose interpretations demonstrate their aesthetic value. To develop the relationship between enacting gifts and performing artworks, I begin by surveying junctures along the gift-event's arc: reply, imagination, trust, recognition, transformation and memory. Transformations arising from agonistic gifts strike me as significant because they characterise the way gifts challenge our beliefs, eventually altering our values. That we grow to love gifts, which we originally rejected out of hand, casts doubt on self-knowledge. Enacted gifts handily challenge self-knowledge's twin features: authority and transparency. As this paper indicates, gift reception helps both to understand ourselves better and to remove the obstacles to what Quassim Cassim calls Substantive Self-Knowledge.

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### I. ENACTING THE GIFT

What you are regarding as a gift is a problem for you to solve.  
Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1943.<sup>1</sup>

In praising the giver's greatness, Marcel Mauss stressed the giver's intention, yet neglected reception, thus failing to accord recipients agency. Even people who instantly enumerate the many horrible gifts they've received over

the years rarely abandon gift-giving, since even ‘bad’ gifts avow alliances. One obvious exception includes those who feel *obliged* to ‘up the ante’ with counter-gifts destined to ‘crush the giver’. Although anthropologists describe ceremonial reciprocal gifts that pose a challenge to recipients as ‘agonistic’, such practices are more ‘pacts of recognition’ than ‘gift-warfare’.<sup>2</sup> In the 2020 English translation of *Le don de philosophes: Repenser la réciprocité*, Marcel Hénaff argues that philosophers who consider gift exchange to annul the ‘gift’ have overlooked what gifts achieve: they foster social bonds and formalise interpersonal relationships.<sup>3</sup> This paper employs his research to demonstrate how unexpected gifts challenge self-knowledge and alter our beliefs. It’s rather fascinating that gift reception has largely escaped philosophers focused on everyday aesthetics. With scores of books addressing gift giving as an art, givers recall John Dewey’s producers, making gift recipients his ‘appreciative, perceiving and enjoying’ consumers. This is not only everyday aesthetics’ standpoint, but those gifts we especially appreciate have aesthetic value on par with everyday aesthetics’ ordinary things.

I’m focused here on those presents that seem to *misrepresent* our preferences, those startling things we’ve all received, whether as birthday gifts, hospitality treats, friendship mementos, collegial gestures or quiet favours. Hardly meant as bribes, such ‘unmotivated’ gifts are simply kind gestures, whose sole purpose is to *complement* our assessed interests, particular taste, physical traits, professional access and special capacities. I use the word ‘complement’ to suggest that even gifts intended as a match can pose a challenge on par with ceremonial reciprocal gifts. Gifts that misrepresent are certainly not meant to wield power over us or harm recipients in any way, since that would nullify the gift. However, demanding gifts (wanted or not) boost our capacities and facilitate access, thus enhancing our wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> Suppose a guy with hazel eyes receives an ‘eye-popping’ loden jumper. Unaware of his anti-hunting sentiments, the giver carefully selected it to match his eyes.<sup>5</sup> Every time he tries it on, he looks in the mirror, shakes his head ‘No way’ and grabs his patched-up blue cardigan instead.

Perhaps gifts’ agonistic prospects are what prompt some to decry gifts as ‘horrible’. If you only ever buy blue clothes because blue is your favourite colour and then someone hands you a loden jumper, you may feel largely misunderstood, slightly cheated and possibly miserable. Having taken a risk, the giver may also feel ‘powerless and [possibly] subjected to the threat of rejection and aggression’.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, gifts launch asymmetrical events, since they ‘throw us into what is yet to be’.<sup>7</sup> Gifts point to future deeds. For Hénaff, gifts prompt unpredictable replies, what he terms ‘alternating dissymmetries’, which for him opens up the interplay of call and reply, rather than annulling the gift as Jacques Derrida averred.<sup>8</sup>

To enact the gift, recipients begin by imagining its use. Presumably, the hazel-eyed guy has survived his whole life without this ‘horrid’ jumper. Who would wear a colour that conveys ‘murderer’? If the giver is trying to tell

him something, why not just say what's on his/her mind? Must he wear the jumper just to please/appease the giver? Gifts inaugurate events that set thoughts in motion, engendering unexpected consequences that spark/break relationships. Gifts thus inspire recipients to evaluate, recognise and perhaps one day appreciate their significance.

Gifts serve as litmus tests. In luring us, we're taken out of our normal ways of being to experience a different side of ourselves. For Emmanuel Levinas, the Other is already given, what Edmund Husserl termed *Gegebenheit* (givenness in English and *le donné* in French). On this level, both gifts and art experiences, such as visits to Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau / 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, exemplify the Other who 'exists before I say I' and typically 'take us away from the circle of the *Same*', such that we never return to the same spot again.<sup>9</sup> Just as presented artworks compel reception, the face of the Other summons us to reply, enabling every I to give to or receive from the Other. Finally, 'What is given... is offered to be grasped'.<sup>10</sup> Levinas adds, 'Through its "transcendence", the "giving-of-itself" promises a possession and enjoyment, a satisfaction'.<sup>11</sup> Gifts challenge us to fulfil said promises.

Enacting a gift is thus a kind of *performance*, whose value depends on the donee's interpretation, just as exhibitions, concerts, staged plays or books are performances of visual art, scores, scripts or texts, whose interpretations demonstrate their aesthetic value. To develop the relationship between enacting gifts and performing artworks, I begin by surveying junctures along the gift-event's arc: reply, imagination, trust, recognition, transformation and memory. Transformations arising from agonistic gift-relationships strike me as significant because they characterise the way gifts challenge our beliefs, eventually altering our values. Ever since the hazel-eyed guy mustered the courage to wear his loden jumper, he's received so many complements that loden is now his go-to colour, a preference he could never have discovered on his own. That we grow to love gifts that we initially rejected handily challenges self-knowledge's twin features: authority and transparency. Either others know us better than we do ourselves or self-knowledge is subject to change, which means it's a belief that is not necessarily justifiable, let alone true.

## II. THE GIFT-EVENT'S ARC

To date, philosophers have tended to address such issues in terms of 'giver-oriented' accounts such that 'A gift is a giver-initiated action with benevolent intent'. Giver-oriented accounts consider the giver's action a gift, thus authorising givers to assess whether their intentions count as benevolent. Problem is, recipients have very different perspectives. Were the hazel-eyed guy asked whether the giver's intentions were benevolent, he would have good reason to

deem them mean. Sometimes givers present gifts just to prompt a reply. In order to resist such ploys, Jean-Paul Sartre considered the gift ‘gratuitous, not motivated and disinterested’.<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, givers prove powerless in their capacity to seek replies, let alone establish a gift’s status; since only the recipient can recognise the giver’s gesture as a gift. The deceptive giver’s motives are thus easily defeated.

Derrida famously derided gifts as ‘the very figure of the impossible’.<sup>13</sup> He considered: ‘the gift another name [for] Being’, ‘absolute forgetting’ necessary to avoid restitution and *Es gibt* (‘there is’) to ‘rest on the choice of an interpretation’.<sup>14</sup> Like artworks, we rarely take gifts at face value, since their utility depends on some interpretation of its use. *Givenness* is simply the state of something in our midst; already present, though not necessarily apparent or appreciated, let alone grasped. Like artists, givers proffer reasons for their gifts. For Derrida, ‘The gift is not a gift: the gift only gives to the extent that it gives time’.<sup>15</sup> And gifts do ‘give time’: 1) *Presents* spur memories of a presently absent Other’s presence, 2) *Treats* save time spent shopping or working to earn money, 3) *Favours* facilitate shortcuts, thus collapsing distances and accelerating time and 4) *Gifts* set events in motion, engendering open-ended journeys that unfold over time.

**Reply.** Philosophers typically apply ‘reply’ to either the gift’s enactment, some ‘countergift’ or the recipient’s singular response, all of which take time. Thank you notes or words that articulate the gift’s significance remain even farther afield. Is the gift the act of giving or acknowledgement of right action? Must the gift be enacted to count as a gift? Who determines whether the gesture is a gift (or a burden)? Historically, Trobriand Islanders practicing *kula* arrived by canoe, displayed *waigu’a* (semi-precious objects) on the beach and waited for the local chief to reciprocate.<sup>16</sup> If no one showed up to accept their bracelets and necklaces, they presumably loaded everything back in the boats and sailed on to the next island with the wind knocked out of their sails. In their role as givers, artists put their artworks out there, having no clue who will respond to their efforts. By contrast, gifts, even artworks given as gifts, are intended for particular recipients. The ‘call’ is intentional from the onset.

What I have in mind however are our spontaneous and immediate reactions (even if negative), what Levinas described as the I’s *reply* to some Other’s call, since this sets the gift-event in motion. I interpret the Other’s call as a gentle gesture meant to signal the I, which may or may not prompt the I’s reply. For Levinas, ‘An object is given, but awaits us’.<sup>17</sup> ‘The passive (given) becomes active (gives itself), which for Levinas means that it delivers itself to be grasped’.<sup>18</sup> And of course, unexpected gifts are no more readily understood than unfamiliar artworks. Even if the hazel-eyed guy shoved his new jumper under his bed and totally forgot about it until he wished he had something to wear to a St. Patrick’s Day Party, his initial contempt set the stage for what ensues. As Levinas notes, ‘Being in its presence offers itself to a taking in hand, is a giving’.<sup>19</sup> However, ‘this taking’ tends to take *time*, even

when ‘the given’ has been under our nose all along (or under our bed). As we shall see, giving’s pole is not reception, but *grasping* in terms of apprehension.

Truthfully, we recipients are under no obligation to reply, yet doing so shows our face, thus keeping the dance alive. For Hénaff, ‘To fail to reply is to give up the game’.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, ‘When Others reply to us, they have already been turned into others by what they have received, just as we become others through their reply: In interpersonal relationships there is an essential otherness; in the unfolding of time each of us becomes the Other’.<sup>21</sup>

So long as recipients are charged with appreciating gestures as gifts (or not), the gift’s (in)significance cannot accrue to the giver. For Derrida, any expectation of gratitude or reciprocity cancels the gift and nullifies its status, leading him to demand ‘absolute forgetting’ on the giver’s part.<sup>22</sup> For Hénaff, the problem is the way obligatory replies, as opposed to spontaneous ones, return recipients to the same spot, thus preventing adventures from unfolding. In constraining givers, Derrida actually negates the autonomy of recipients, whose ‘reply... restores the autonomy of the Others who face us and makes us other than ourselves’.<sup>23</sup> Thus, each recipient’s unique reply stands to move the giver out of his/her ordinary conduct. That each subject’s being is always in relation to another’s further complicates recipient agency.

In characterising the reply as a ‘fundamental indeterminacy’, Hénaff draws yet another parallel between gifts and artworks.<sup>24</sup> He credits the *unpredictable* debt of reply with reversing the predictable debt of dependence, which frustrated those philosophers who failed to accord donees the driver’s seat.<sup>25</sup> Derrida maintains, ‘For there to be a gift, it is necessary that the donee not give back, amortise, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into contract, and that he never have contracted a debt’.<sup>26</sup> Hénaff counters: ‘[D]esire is a real movement expressed by the act that carries us toward Others. But this act that takes us away from the circle of the Same is not a mere decision we are free to make or not make; it is compelled in us by the face of others, which calls and summons us, unconditionally’.<sup>27</sup>

Just as the giver intends a gift for a particular person, the ‘I’ expresses his/her uniqueness in his/her reply (and even by ‘ghosting’). Hénaff remarks, ‘As living beings and as embodiments of freedom they must reply to us; they must uphold their names. The fact of their reply constitutes them as others according to the very uniqueness recognised in them. Their reply can only be unique, meant for us and no one else; only by its uniqueness does it designate us just as uniquely as responsible toward them; this defines the Self as nonsubstitutable’.<sup>28</sup> ‘Passivity thus means primarily that the Self does not constitute the foundation of things; the world is already there, and it is other than us’.<sup>29</sup> Finally, ‘the reply... moves us forward along the diachronic line; but this is a bifurcating line’.<sup>30</sup>

We need not ascribe intentions to artists and gift-givers to see the similarity between exhibiting artworks and presenting presents. Both parties take a risk, though artists typically yearn for feedback, while gift-givers who await

replies belie the profundity of gifts. When exhibited artworks fail to attract reception (no reviews, no feedback... just totally ignored), an artist's sense of powerlessness resembles that of gift-givers who've risked outright rejection. However, making and exhibiting artworks expose artists' skills, ideas, techniques, values and views to the whole world, not just one recipient at a time, so artists' sensitivities are hardly surprising. We don't imagine gift-givers feeling so vulnerable, since they knowingly take and accept the risk that their gifts may end up being less popular than they'd hoped. Their satisfaction stems more from the act of giving than some expected reply, otherwise anxieties will arise between givers and recipients. Once the stakes become high, the motion put in play by the gift can grind to a screeching halt. Similarly, dissatisfied art lovers who actively listen, but fail to hear the call are tempted to feel 'largely misunderstood, slightly cheated, and possibly miserable', despite the massive array of potential art experiences. Making the call audible requires recipients and art lovers alike to attune the imagination to the right frequency.

**Imagination.** One might ask what the imagination has to do with hearing the call of the Other. Sometimes recipients exhaust more energy trying to figure out how to use their gift than givers expended deciding what to give. Like artworks, gifts compel us to imagine their relevance. When we receive a gift, it takes time to determine: its use, how to display/store it, how to protect it and why it's valuable. As Derrida observed, 'what is given... rests on the choice of an interpretation'.<sup>31</sup> Thus, recipients decide what counts as a gift, whereas givers don't know unless the gift reappears. With artworks, we similarly begin by asking ourselves why anyone would appreciate this... and eventually we discover our own reasons for appreciating it, which only serve to strengthen our fondness for the artworks. I envision this 'gift relationship' holding for literature, films, theatre, built environments and much more. As we shall see, our agonistic relationships with gifts transform us, much like our experiences with artworks that we originally rejected.

Exemplary of the imagination at play, the hazel-eyed guy suddenly realises that wearing loden will prevent party-goers from pinching him even though it's not quite shamrock green. Suddenly, this forgotten, despised garment proves purposeful. Although it was originally given to him as an alternative to his frayed jumper, he has until now found every excuse in the book to ignore the call of the Other. It's obviously not the green *for him*, since it's more appropriate for hunters than vegans and doesn't yet match anything else he wears. To justify wearing it, he interprets it as befitting St. Patrick's Day, thus enlivening its *givenness*.

Enacting a gift is always first and foremost an act of the imagination, because gifts selected by Others strike us differently (they tend to startle) than those things we choose. Even gifts selected *for us* challenge our imagination, reminding us that we are not the Other. Hénaff adds, 'What is given... testifies to the very separation between us and Others'.<sup>32</sup> Every gift



entails ‘the irruption of Others’ that ‘suspends the reciprocity between giving and grasping’.<sup>33</sup> It’s a new world, no longer the Same.<sup>34</sup> Figuring out how to grasp the gift at hand is difficult, but hardly *impossible* as Derrida claimed. What happens next is anybody’s guess. As Jean-Luc Marion likes to say, ‘What *shows itself* first *gives itself*’.<sup>35</sup> To show what is given, the donee effectively tests his/her original gift-beliefs. Further affirming my claim that enacting gifts is on par with performing artworks, Hénaff says rather explicitly, ‘Givenness belongs to the order of *performative effectiveness* . . . givenness exists only as an operation’.<sup>36</sup> The recipient’s eventual gift enactment demonstrates givenness and is thus an effective performance. Were it not for loden’s negative connotations, the hazel-eyed guy would gladly wear it instead of his tattered jumper.

**Trust.** Imagine another route. Try as we may, we cannot ‘hear’ the Other’s call: no apparent interpretation makes the gift fit. It’s clear that the giver has our best interests at heart, but we cannot fathom what those might be. We have two more options: blindly trust the giver or seek advice from another person whom we trust. Unlike moral deference, we are merely seeking an alternate interpretation, not moral advice enabling us to deflect responsibility onto others. It hardly matters who offers the interpretation, so long as we hear the Other’s call. If an unfamiliar wine doesn’t taste so great, one friend might suggest that we use it for cooking, while a wine expert might provide special information, such as ‘serve it chilled’, which measurably improves its flavour. When we cannot figure out how to evaluate the artwork at hand, we scan the program or read the adjacent object label. In both cases, we rely on those who have performed the artworks as shown. Our deference may be only temporary, lasting only long enough until we get our own handle on the artwork or it may be permanent, since we deem it the best way to hear the call of the Other. That we willingly adopt another’s interpretation to make an artwork meaningful or a gift relevant signals trust.

Trusting the giver helps. If the hazel-eyed guy views the giver with suspicion, doubt or remorse, the loden jumper will likely never see the light of day. If he doesn’t already love it, he will probably not feel moved to try it. The islanders who showed up to receive gifts clearly trusted the gift-bearers. If ‘gift display’ had been interpreted as a Trojan Horse, their fear of being ambushed would have led them to defend their island instead. Such high levels of trust can inspire recipients to cease control, a feature common to both gifts and artworks. Gift acceptance signals alliance as the specificity of Self joins with the *alienness* of the Other. It’s as if a ‘third-party element conjoins the two sides: There is no covenant without an ark of covenant’.<sup>37</sup>

Presumably, the donee who trusts the donor dons the sweater sooner than later, even if sporting loden in public still leaves him feeling icky. That we opt to take/leave gifts and then treasure/dismiss them out of hand are other aspects that gift reception shares with art experiences. When we suddenly appreciate artworks that we previously rejected, the artwork doubles as a gift.

Already given, artworks are there for our grasping. As audience members, we decide which artworks strike us as worthy of greater consideration and repeat experiences, so art experiences reflect our capacity for trust. If we trust the gallerist's eye, the curator's vision or the reviewers' perspective, then we are more likely to treat a 'weak exhibition' seriously, give it greater thought or reconsider our initial response. I call this aesthetic trust, since we temporarily defer to experts, whom we believe have greater insight. In trusting others, we have considerably more satisfying experiences. By contrast, transformation requires us to grasp the gift/artwork for ourselves, enabling us to recognise ourselves in the gift/artwork.

On a related note, Hénaff considers gifts the opposite of contracts.<sup>38</sup> Even so, gifts bear witness to commitments implicit in alliances.<sup>39</sup> Recall the islanders' ceremonial gifts, whose purpose is social (builds trust), not moral (kindness, mutual aid or solidarity).<sup>40</sup> He credits the reply at the heart of reciprocal gifts with sanctioning trust. I have tried to show that the gift must be enacted to count as a gift, even if the giver never witnesses it. *Showing* givenness strengthens alliances while diminishing feelings of disrespect, ingratitude and even self-pity. Hénaff distinguishes mutuality from reciprocity as follows: 'Mutuality is trust confirmed, and even trust instituted, whereas reciprocity indicates that trust is being sought, in the process of being established, but can still be lost'.<sup>41</sup> That the recipient feels compelled to enact the gift in the giver's presence boosts trust.

**Recognition.** Thus far, I have developed a 'recipient-oriented account' that credits recipients' recognition of the gift to either some imaginative interpretation or their willingness to trust an interpretation offered by friends or experts. One can already see that recognition is stronger than mere reply. The hazel-eyed guy replied by shoving the jumper under his bed. Recognition came much later when he finally accepted loden as his colour. With *recognition*, we not only appreciate the gesture as a gift, but we face the Other as we discover ourselves in the gift. It is one thing to occasionally wear the jumper to St. Paddy's parties, but it is quite another to admit that loden is truly fitting, despite its hunting connotations. Hénaff astutely states, 'What is at stake is the act', such that 'discourse gives way to *performance*'.<sup>42</sup> As previously noted, this discourse is the interpretation that enables the gift to be enacted, or performed. According to Marion, 'If [givenness] makes the given appear and sets the stage for the phenomenon –it must therefore be understood as an act'.<sup>43</sup> Such a view begs the question, an act for whom, the giver or the recipient? As briefly noted, the obligatory act returns us to the same spot, whereas spontaneous actions take us out of the circle of the Same. I prefer 'action', since the word 'act' conveys pretend or manipulation, yet the gift exists in real time.

Rightly or wrongly, we sometimes tender gifts to discern whether the I is one of us. Are they real human beings or just ghosts? Is the recipient respectful or spoiled? Is he/she curious or incurious? We even anticipate gifts



prompting appropriate replies. Donees unwittingly test our patience. On cold days, the frustrated donor wonders whether the donee will show up wearing the loden jumper. Upon inquiring, the donor encounters a vehemently anti-hunting vegan activist. Truth be told, expectations tender trouble since the Other is not the Self. We must await the phenomenon of recognition, whereby the recipient recognises something in the gift. Levinas demands ‘ingratitude’ from the Other since ‘gratitude would in fact be the return of the movement to its origin.’<sup>44</sup> Gratitude tends to refocus the gift on the giver. Each enactment or rejection reflects our attempt to recognise ourselves in the gift’s alienness. For Hénaff, ‘To be what we are we need to recognise what we are not.’<sup>45</sup>

Since gifts entail an irruption by the Other, recognition takes a long time. Hénaff adds, ‘We are designated by Others; as we face them we have nothing to ask.’<sup>46</sup> He remarks how the face ‘is not a sign of the Other; *it is the Other*, it occurs to us as such without any mediation; it addresses and compels us even if we do not see it.’<sup>47</sup> Moreover, ‘It is within this world of need and through relationships other than justice that Others usually call on us; this call is especially urgent in situations of deprivation, where it summons us to provide the only possible reply: support and generous giving.’<sup>48</sup> ‘Others are an event, and as such they necessarily escape our knowledge, will and power. . . . We are responsible for Others since only a Self can recognise Others.’<sup>49</sup>

We thus perform our gifts for ourselves. That the giver witnesses this is a happy accident. Marion denies Derrida’s view that the donee must not recognise it ‘as [a] gift, if the gift appears to *him* as such, if the present is present to him *as present*, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift.’<sup>50</sup> Gifts stand out, precisely because gift acceptance indicates that we have faced the irruption of the Other. For Hénaff, ‘this otherness alone pulls our gaze, knowledge and desire away from the circularity of the given world, giving rise in it to the unrepresentable figure that gives it to us.’<sup>51</sup> Although Marion claims that ‘the staging of the phenomenon is played out as the handing over of a gift’, the staging rather begins with our reply, since the handing over promises a gift, but doesn’t necessarily deliver.<sup>52</sup> Sans audience, the play whose curtains open to reveal an elaborate stage full of giddy actors is rather a rehearsal. Our eventual transformation ties the agonistic gift to the otherwise inaudible call of the Other.

**Transformation.** Like artworks, the gift introduces an element of exteriority that inevitably transgresses Kant’s circular reciprocity. Levinas considers reciprocity problematic, not only because it’s circular, but its circulation is closed so long as ‘Needs open onto a world that is for me –it returns to itself [. . .]. Need is return itself.’<sup>53</sup> Problematically, this self-sufficient world secures happiness ‘within the bounds of positive knowledge, fulfilled utilities and human relationships ruled by justice. It constitutes a totality, what Levinas calls the Same.’<sup>54</sup> Initiated by exterior elements (outside the I), the gift’s consequences are never the Same, which is why gifts rarely secure immediate happiness. In letting the gift in, the Self undergoes a transformation.

For Levinas, ‘The given is not ourselves. The ego possesses the given, but is not overwhelmed by that possession and keeps a distance from the object, an attitude of reserve, which is what distinguishes an intention from an enjoyment. The possession of a distance, keeping one’s hands free, is what constitutes an intentionality of an intention.’<sup>55</sup> Gifts thus compel the Self out of the Same, this self-sufficient world where everything we want and need is already available. In the gift-world, ‘the Self moves towards the other’, forcing us to face the Other, while finding uses for things that others anticipate we want, which requires adaption to spawn desires. Hénaff considers the ‘good’ ‘the power that tears us away from the immanence of being’.<sup>56</sup> ‘Goodness in the subject is anarchy itself’.<sup>57</sup>

As should be clear by now, ‘[m]eaning is a direction... it signals a movement towards elsewhere’.<sup>58</sup> ‘This agonistic face-to-face, opens the way to plural mutuality... a plurality that begins with two parties, and then extends to several’.<sup>59</sup> For these reasons, ‘symmetry is impossible, because Others come to us from an elsewhere that both escapes us and grabs us. Our necessarily dissymmetrical relationship with Others proceeds directly from their radical otherness. The movement that leads Us to Others is nonreversible; it is entirely incomparable to the movement that leads Others to Us’.<sup>60</sup>

A relationship constitutes a convention.<sup>61</sup> ‘[E]very encounter or social relationship presupposes the act of reciprocal recognition, and designates every human to every other as a being that must be considered in his/her dignity and respected unconditionally’.<sup>62</sup> For Hénaff, the ceremonial gift is not foundational, but it reveals society’s foundations. This engenders several spheres of recognition: institutional, social and personal that facilitate self-respect in legal order, self-esteem in ethical life and self-confidence in love and friendship.<sup>63</sup> He observes how ‘the recognition gained in one sphere can provide the basis of a self-esteem that can make it possible for us to succeed in another sphere’.<sup>64</sup> Our practices in common prove foundational for ‘trust, respect [and] mutual recognition of the dignity of the other’.<sup>65</sup> ‘More radically still, this generosity generates gestures of recognition of and respect for every human being without any distinction’, recalling Levinas’s face of the Other that ‘addresses us –anyone, anywhere, whenever we experience our first encounter with another human being’.<sup>66</sup>

**Memory.** Considering the recipient’s transformation at the hands of the gift, gifts primarily serve as the ‘memory of the bonds they carry’, not financial gains (labourers’ skills/time and rare stones/shells).<sup>67</sup> The saying ‘to forgive is to forget’ reflects a ‘giver-oriented’ account, such that offenders insist on forgetting. On a similar note, gift-recipients are unlikely to forget their having faced the irruption of the other. In light of agonistic gifts, recipients likely counter ‘to forgive is to remember’. Although Mauss claimed that ‘What is given is always oneself’, it’s now clear that recipients give no less of themselves.<sup>68</sup> Gifts register historic transformations, two-way relationships that are more tussles than exchanges, requiring both parties to give of them-

selves. If a mutual alliance develops, the gift procures unspoken advice and loyalty via gestures primed to spark recollection of the recognition process.

Thus far, I've mentioned numerous similarities between experiencing artworks and receiving gifts, including the way artists/givers take risks, artworks/gifts compel spectators/recipients to enact/ignore them and spectators/recipients undergo transformations (or not)). It should come as no surprise that I made a similar claim in my first published philosophy paper 'Beauty as Duty', 'Viewing beautiful art could be analogous to receiving a gift'.<sup>69</sup> Continuing, 'Intent on framing beauty in terms devoid of gaze aesthetics, it seem[s] plausible to conclude that whenever an artist acts from duty (in a Kantian sense), the viewer is the beneficiary of the artist's generosity. Kantian duty requires each person to act as one wished everyone to act, irrespective of any payoff'.<sup>70</sup> In appreciating artists' efforts, 'the viewer has also demonstrated an unintentional generosity'.<sup>71</sup>

### III. HOW GIFTS IMPROVE SELF-KNOWLEDGE

As noted at this paper's onset, the gift's capacity to challenge self-knowledge and thus transform recipient's beliefs is what ultimately interests me. The giver's gift is predicated on the assumption that the recipient is rational, such that *any* rational person *ought* to want it, irrespective of the recipient's wishes. In such cases, the giver believes the recipient would immediately access this something if he/she could, so the fact that this something is being offered for free makes it the perfect gift. Because gifts are destined for singular recipients, any notion of 'rational' cannot be general (as in 'any rational actor'), but is rather particular, as in 'rational given this particular context'.

Since self-knowledge is predicated on rationality, philosophers typically see no reason to doubt people's claims about their feelings, beliefs, desires and attitudes, since the latter 'are responsive to reasons, to changes in what you have reason to believe, and that is why they are as they rationally ought to be'.<sup>72</sup> To ascertain our beliefs about so and so, we simply ask ourselves what we think about so and so.<sup>73</sup> Quassim Cassam terms this the 'Transparency Method' (TM). He distinguishes *homo philosophicus* as human beings whose attitudes are 'as they rationally ought to be' from *homo sapiens*, we 'ordinary humans' who suffer self-ignorance when our attitudes are either irrational or inaccessible.<sup>74</sup> Ever since Pausanias identified the inscription 'Know Thyself' on the pronaos of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, philosophers have imagined *homo philosophicus* using TM to access beliefs, fears and desires. This image of self-knowledge as being there for the taking (direct via TM), characterises self-knowledge as already given like gifts and artworks.

As Cassam remarks, 'TM is tailor made for *homo philosophicus*', which may explain why so few philosophers, save perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche and more recently Eric Schwitzgebel, have bothered to challenge TM's accuracy.<sup>75</sup>

Unlike Nietzsche who claimed that ‘we are necessarily strangers to ourselves’, Cassam doesn’t consider self-knowledge *prima facie* impossible, even though a degree of self-ignorance is normal.<sup>76</sup>

The prevalence among humans of the factors that cause us to be self-ignorant is, at least to some extent, an empirical matter. It’s an empirical question how prone we are to misinterpreting the behavioural and psychological evidence for our own attitudes, or to what extent we are capable of avoiding various kinds of bias in thinking about our own characters. No doubt there are psychological studies that bear on these questions, but you don’t have to have read these studies to realise that the cognitive vices which lead to self-ignorance are far from rare or unusual; reading great novels and talking to your friends would do just as well.<sup>77</sup>

Cassam considers the difference between *trivial* self-knowledge (TSK), such that one believes it will rain, from the slower *substantial* self-knowledge (SSK), which includes knowledge of our character, values, abilities, aptitudes, reasons, emotions and what makes us happy a matter of degree.<sup>78</sup> As it turns out, SSK is the kind of thing that matters more to ordinary humans, but it poses obstacles, since we are, after all, *allzumenschliches*.<sup>79</sup> Cassam worries that philosophers’ assumption that self-knowledge is both direct and authoritative (belief-holder access accords legitimacy) has led them to focus on TSK at the expense of SSK, leaving self-knowledge vulnerable to factual error, repression, bias, self-deception, self-conception, challenges, incorrigibility, non-transparency, counter-evidence, lack of reflection, indirectness, and value incoherence, all of which he discusses in great detail in Chapter 3. For our purposes, ‘The Corrigibility Condition’ such that ‘you may not be in the best position to know about such matters and others might know better; your spouse may well have a much deeper insight into your character than you do’ proves most relevant.<sup>80</sup> Upon hearing why the hazel-eyed guy abhors ‘brownish greens’, the giver could have proposed returning his eye-popping jumper in order to offer it to someone else who needs it. Since the gift was not retracted, the donor must have good reason to believe that his views are likely to change.

Even if accessing SSK proves difficult and few recipients share *homo philosophicus*’ access, TSK is surely relevant, since our reply wholly depends on our immediate access to our preferences. So long as donees are not anti-hunting vegan activists, they’re unlikely to shun loden. If agonistic gifts by definition take us out of the *Same*, then the recipient who wears the jumper without reflecting upon its connotations acquires the garment for free, yet stays within the circle. If the gift’s transformative powers rest on its agonistic relationship, then TSK sets the gift in motion, whereas enacting the gift, which facilitates transformation, engenders SSK. It is important that we take a stand, even if our actions show us (and others) that we are effectively clueless. It is only by enacting the gift that we gain access to SSK, since doing so triggers our access to the very obstacles blocking our access to SSK. Although Cassam

never mentions gifts in *Self-Knowledge for Humans*, he does discuss the role of evidence, in particular how our actions provide evidence for our beliefs, which influences other people's assessments of us. And this disconnect between what we think we believe and how we act lets others feel confident that they know us in ways that we don't. To be clear, my point is not that other people know us better than we know ourselves, but that gifts help us access SSK. Furthermore, our initial reply reflects our tendency to privilege TSK at the expense of SSK, otherwise we would thoughtfully respond, 'I'll think on it' when presented with 'unwanted' gifts. But in fact, we rarely question our decisions to reject/ignore gifts. Although we rarely go so far as to outright decline them, we're ultimately surprised when we end up valuing things that originally struck as 'meh!' or 'Oh boy!'

When Kevin Melchionne published his clever paper 'On the Old Saw "I Know Nothing About Art but I Know What I Like"', he upended this 'old saw' as it pertains to what we deem our aesthetic preferences.<sup>81</sup> Citing psychological evidence, he explains that when human beings are asked to give reasons for their particular selections, they actually become confused, and sometimes realise that their aesthetic preferences have either changed or are far more malleable than previously thought. Melchionne offers the 'fallibility of reasons' to explain why people's choices change as their reasons to believe shift. Philosophers who uphold *homo philosophicus* have tended to attribute such shifting to irrational behaviour. As Cassam states, 'Acknowledging the Disparity [between actions and reasons] isn't about convicting us of irrationality but of trying to be realistic about how we reason and come to know ourselves'.<sup>82</sup> To my lights, the 'old saw' exemplifies our faith in TM, even though we value aesthetic experiences because they trigger our access to SSK. The unexpected nature of gifts offers an even greater potential to upend preferences.

In light of behavioural economics' research, we recognise that rational creatures don't necessarily change their attitudes when faced with new evidence. Until recently, however, philosophers considered rationality relational to thoughts and behaviours, such that people are moved by reasons. Thomas Scanlon's *What We Owe to Each Other* attributes his narrow account of irrationality to inconsistency, rather than mistaken beliefs. He summarises,

'When a rational creature judges that a certain attitude is warranted, she generally comes to have this attitude, and "when a rational creature judges that the reasons she is aware of count decisively against a certain attitude, she generally does not have that attitude, or ceases to have it if she did so before"'.<sup>83</sup>

It becomes clear that the gift's presence, our initial reply and our repeat efforts to enact it generate new reasons to reassess extant beliefs.

Cassam considers rationality a systemic matter, since it connects ‘aspects of the person’s thoughts and behaviour. And what makes it intelligible that “rational creatures are sometimes irrational” is the fact that these connections need not hold in every case’.<sup>84</sup> The giver who doesn’t insist on the unworn jumper’s return presumes rationality given the obvious need for a new one. That the donee grows to love his loden jumper hardly means that he is irrational. His judgement-sensitive attitudes have changed. First, it fit the St. Patrick’s Day party, during which he received complements. Then he realised that loden signals ‘leafy greens’ as much as it does hunting. Those who fail to realise that the evidence for p has been discredited open themselves up to rational criticism, even though continuing to believe that p doesn’t prove irrationality.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps the hazel-eyed guy was boorish: his gift-rejection reflected some combination of belief-perseverance (beliefs persevere despite contrary evidence) and confirmation bias (believer seeks evidence that sustains prior beliefs). Beliefs are like habits: they’re difficult to change. If we don’t like the gift, it’s unreasonable to regularly try it on to see whether our minds have changed.<sup>86</sup> Obstacles to reception are a lot like obstacles to SSK (repression, self-deception, not worth overcoming).

With gifts, the ‘what’ is already present, leaving reasons for/against (or why) in question. Enacting new gifts is comparable to adopting new beliefs. We generate reasons, what I earlier termed interpretations, to incorporate gifts into our lives. If our reasons don’t fit the gift, we need new ones. What interests me is the way gifts offer us opportunities to test-drive new beliefs, which help us eliminate obstacles to self-knowledge. Otherwise, we hold on to beliefs the way we do clothes that occupy our closets, but never our bodies.

#### IV. HOW GIFTS REFUTE DENNETT’S SIMILARITY THESIS

Despite the obvious disparities that exist between *homo philosophicus* and *homo sapiens*, Daniel Dennett proposed the Similarity Thesis, which recommends that ‘we approach each other as what he calls “intentional systems”; that is, as entities whose behavior can be predicted by the method of attributing beliefs, desires, and rational acumen according to the following principles’: 1) ‘a system’s beliefs are those it *ought* to have, given its perceptual capacities, its epistemic needs, and its biography’, 2) ‘A system’s desires are those it *ought to have*, given its biological needs and the most practical means of satisfying them’ and 3) ‘A system’s behavior will consist of those acts it could be rational for an agent with those beliefs and desires to perform’.<sup>87</sup> This all seems well and good until we consider gift-giving, which involves two parties assessing the other and themselves despite inadequate information. As Cassam points out, ‘We ascribe beliefs and desires to give reason-giving explanations of actions, and beliefs and desires can themselves be given ratio-



nal explanations; we make it intelligible that S believes that P by explaining why S ought to believe that P in these circumstances'.<sup>88</sup> We can explain the hazel-eyed guy's reply, but it remains unpredictable.

Dennett's version of the Similarity Thesis suggests that even if we're not ideal epistemic and connotative agents we 'approximate to the ideal version of ourselves exploited to yield predictions'.<sup>89</sup> That is, we attribute rationality to what *homo philosophicus* ought to believe or desire. Cassam terms this Interpretationism since its truth depends on our *interpretation* of what the subject believes or desires, which is based on some optimal agreement between what the subject believes and what he/she ought to believe, his/her other attitudes and the available evidence.<sup>90</sup> Notice that Dennett's emphasizing some interpretation, rationality and 'evidence' seems 'implicitly inferential' like TSK.<sup>91</sup> Gifts demonstrate the way gift-attitudes are more moving targets than 'intentional systems'. As contexts change, so do our beliefs and desires about them. That the hazel-eyed guy offers clear reasons for avoiding loden, which he later wears hardly makes him irrational. That the giver is in no better position to predict recipient responses poses a challenge to views like Dennett's that presuppose the ease of treating people like 'intentional systems'.

In the end, we don't actually ascribe beliefs because they are what others ought *rationally* to believe. Moreover, thoughts of rational beliefs don't do the explanatory work. For example, the giver failed to consider the hazel-eyed guy an avid anti-hunting vegan. When ascribing beliefs, there are non-rational factors such as the bias to believe, attractions of conspiracy theories, prevalence of belief-perseverance and attitude-recalcitrance.<sup>92</sup> Intelligibility doesn't depend on rationality. Moreover, the 'argument from above' doesn't eliminate the disparity between ideal and actual actors.<sup>93</sup> In fact, Cassam rates the argument from above as weaker than Psychological Rationalism, since its ideal epistemic agents remain approximations.<sup>94</sup> '[I]f the principles of rationality are substantial enough to rule out the Disparity then it's implausible that they structure and organise our attributions of belief and desire to each other. . . . [I]f Dennett's principles structure and organise our attributions of attitudes to each other then they can't be substantial enough to rule out the Disparity'.<sup>95</sup> For these reasons, impasses arise from the moment the recipient takes gift in hand.

## V. A FINAL APPROACH

Activism makes self-knowledge a species of what we sometimes call *maker's knowledge*, which is 'the knowledge you have of what you yourself make'.<sup>96</sup> You come to know what you believe by coming to know what you ought to believe. For Cassam, the 'Activist's Proposal' is such that in coming to determine that we ought rationally to believe, we *epistemically* determine that we believe that p, and thereby constitutively determine that we believe that p. We are active, we reason ourselves 'into believing or wanting something,

and it certainly isn't correct in these cases to say that [we] are a mere passive observer of [our] attitudes'.<sup>97</sup> If all beliefs required deliberation or reasoning, we would have fewer beliefs. 'Neither the belief nor knowledge of B is a product of deliberation'.<sup>98</sup> Beliefs are retrieved not formed. Moreover, 'nothing that is recognisable as a belief can be totally insulated from the engagement of one's rational capacities, but the question is whether the sense in which we are "active" in relation to our stored or perceptual beliefs casts any light on how we know them'.<sup>99</sup> In light of new evidence, beliefs are revised sub-personally, 'rather than by me, the subject of the belief'.<sup>100</sup> Activism entails two types of activities- attitudes formed as acts of deliberation and those that are sensitive to our reasoning. For these reasons, we appreciate agonistic gifts that prompt us to access beliefs we might never retrieve otherwise.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Wittgenstein 1984, 43.  
<sup>2</sup>Hénaff 2020, 39-42.  
<sup>3</sup>Hénaff 2020, 6-7.  
<sup>4</sup>Spaid 2019, 7-8.  
<sup>5</sup>I specifically chose the colour 'loden' since it looks amazing on people with hazel eyes, plus it elicits diverse connotations. Given its origin in the Tyrolean Alps, I must admit, however, that I felt a bit self-conscious when I presented this paper at the 2021 Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ästhetik conference.  
<sup>6</sup>Hénaff 2020, 66.  
<sup>7</sup>Hénaff 2020, 18.  
<sup>8</sup>Hénaff 2020, 18.  
<sup>9</sup>Hénaff 2020, 55, 66.  
<sup>10</sup>Hénaff 2020, 59.  
<sup>11</sup>Levinas 1978, 48.  
<sup>12</sup>Sartre 1992, 368.  
<sup>13</sup>Derrida 1992, 7.  
<sup>14</sup>Hénaff 2020, 15.  
<sup>15</sup>Hénaff 2020, 13.  
<sup>16</sup>Hénaff 2020, 32.  
<sup>17</sup>Levinas 1978, 47.  
<sup>18</sup>Hénaff 2020, 59.  
<sup>19</sup>Levinas 1998, 139.  
<sup>20</sup>Hénaff 2020, 44.  
<sup>21</sup>Hénaff 2020, 75.  
<sup>22</sup>Hénaff 2020, 13-14.  
<sup>23</sup>Hénaff 2020, 75.  
<sup>24</sup>Hénaff 2020, 88.  
<sup>25</sup>Hénaff 2020, 20.  
<sup>26</sup>Derrida 1992, 13.  
<sup>27</sup>Hénaff 2020, 66; Levinas 1969, 187-247.  
<sup>28</sup>Hénaff 2020, 75.  
<sup>29</sup>Hénaff 2020, 67.  
<sup>30</sup>Hénaff 2020, 75.  
<sup>31</sup>Hénaff 2020, 15.  
<sup>32</sup>Hénaff 2020, 62.  
<sup>33</sup>Hénaff 2020, 62.  
<sup>34</sup>Hénaff 2020, 61; Levinas 1969, 92.  
<sup>35</sup>Marion 2002, 5.  
<sup>36</sup>Hénaff 2020, 103.  
<sup>37</sup>Hénaff 2020, 41.  
<sup>38</sup>Hénaff 2020, 36.  
<sup>39</sup>Hénaff 2020, 22.  
<sup>40</sup>Hénaff 2020, 35.  
<sup>41</sup>Hénaff 2020, 92.  
<sup>42</sup>Hénaff 2020, 105.  
<sup>43</sup>Hénaff 2020, 105-106.  
<sup>44</sup>Levinas 2003, 26-27.  
<sup>45</sup>Hénaff 2020, 42.  
<sup>46</sup>Hénaff 2020, 67.  
<sup>47</sup>Hénaff 2020, 66.  
<sup>48</sup>Hénaff 2020, 58.  
<sup>49</sup>Hénaff 2020, 64.  
<sup>50</sup>Derrida 1992, 13.  
<sup>51</sup>Hénaff 2020, 61.  
<sup>52</sup>Marion 2002, 27.  
<sup>53</sup>Levinas 2001, 268.  
<sup>54</sup>Hénaff 2020, 57.  
<sup>55</sup>Levinas 1978, 46.  
<sup>56</sup>Hénaff 2020, 69.

- <sup>57</sup>Levinas 2003, 26-27.  
<sup>58</sup>Hénaff 2020, 68.  
<sup>59</sup>Hénaff 2020, 88.  
<sup>60</sup>Hénaff 2020, 63.  
<sup>61</sup>Hénaff 2020, 43.  
<sup>62</sup>Hénaff 2020, 46.  
<sup>63</sup>Hénaff 2020, 49.  
<sup>64</sup>Hénaff 2020, 49.  
<sup>65</sup>Hénaff 2020, 50.  
<sup>66</sup>Hénaff 2020, 50.  
<sup>67</sup>Hénaff 2020, 32.  
<sup>68</sup>Mauss 1990, 11-12.  
<sup>69</sup>Spaid 1999, 112.  
<sup>70</sup>Spaid 1999, 112.  
<sup>71</sup>Spaid 1999, 113.  
<sup>72</sup>Cassam 2014, 2.  
<sup>73</sup>Cassam 2014, 2.  
<sup>74</sup>Cassam 2014, 5.  
<sup>75</sup>Cassam 2014, 2.  
<sup>76</sup>Cassam 2014, 190.  
<sup>77</sup>Cassam 2014, 206.  
<sup>78</sup>Cassam 2014, 29.  
<sup>79</sup>Cassam 2014, 36.  
<sup>80</sup>Cassam 2014, 30.  
<sup>81</sup>Melchionne 2010.  
<sup>82</sup>Cassam 2014, ix-x.  
<sup>83</sup>Cassam 2014, 91.  
<sup>84</sup>Cassam 2014, 91.  
<sup>85</sup>Cassam 2014, 95.  
<sup>86</sup>Cassam 2014, 23.  
<sup>87</sup>Cassam 2014, 60; Dennett 1987, 49.  
<sup>88</sup>Cassam 2014, 61.  
<sup>89</sup>Dennett 1987, 51.  
<sup>90</sup>Cassam 2014, 57.  
<sup>91</sup>Cassam 2014, 136.  
<sup>92</sup>Cassam 2014, 65.  
<sup>93</sup>Cassam 2014, 66.  
<sup>94</sup>Cassam 2014, 68.  
<sup>95</sup>Cassam 2014, 68.  
<sup>96</sup>Cassam 2014, 113.  
<sup>97</sup>Moran 2004, 458.  
<sup>98</sup>Cassam 2014, 113.  
<sup>99</sup>Cassam 2014, p. 114.  
<sup>100</sup>Cassam 2014, 115.

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