

## Paul and the Knowledge that Puffs Up: a Taste for Idolatry<sup>1</sup>

Bruce Ellis Benson

Wheaton College (Illinois)

The entire pericope of I Corinthians 8-10 can be situated between the strange juxtaposition of two phrases that we find at the beginning of chapter eight: “*Peri de tōn eidōlothutōn*” and “*oidamen hoti pantes gnōsin exomen*” [“now concerning food sacrificed to idols” and “we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge’”].<sup>2</sup> While it might seem as if Paul turns to idolatry only to be immediately distracted by one of the chief claims of the Corinthians—that they “know”—the linking of idolatry and knowledge is crucial to Paul’s argument.<sup>3</sup> Since knowledge claims and idolatry often go together, Paul actually addresses what turn out to be variants of a well-established pattern.

I Corinthians 8-10, of course, has been the subject of intense debate. At issue are not merely how the different themes in these chapters relate—themes such as partaking in pagan rituals, eating food sacrificed to idols, love and knowledge, the “weak” versus the “strong,” the Corinthian exercise of their rights—but also what Paul’s position regarding food sacrificed to idols truly is. In chapter eight, he seems to go along with the Corinthians who claim that idols are “nothing.” On that reading, eating food sacrificed to idols is not wrong *per se*: it only becomes wrong when it causes a “weaker” member of the body to stumble. Yet, in chapter ten, Paul appears to change his mind when he asserts that eating food sacrificed to idols is the equivalent of dining with demons. To complicate matters still, at the end of chapter ten he advises that, when

buying food in the market or eating with friends, one should refrain from asking questions about the food’s provenance. So what is Paul’s real position? Is it that of 8:1-13, 10:14-22, or 10:23-11:1? Further, sandwiched between chapters eight and ten is Paul’s apparent digression regarding his apostolic rights in chapter nine. Exactly how does that relate to the chapters on either side?

In what follows, I will argue that Paul in effect lays out two economies, that of a kind of knowledge (rather than simply knowledge *per se*)<sup>4</sup> and that of love. These economies are in turn defined by a series of dichotomies—puffing up and building up, the strong and the weak, and exercising one’s freedom versus being a servant and a steward. All of these categories have a connection to idolatry. For, even though puffing up, being strong, and exercising one’s freedom do not necessarily constitute idolatry, they make one dangerously prone to it. To see why that is so, we need to consider what Paul says about these two economies and relate that to Paul’s letter to Corinth as a whole, to what Scripture says about idolatry elsewhere (particularly Genesis 3), and to recent work by Continental philosophers. In so doing, we’ll also arrive at an account that explains how I Corinthians 8-10 is a unified rather than divided passage, that Paul’s seemingly strange juxtaposition of idol food [*eidōlothutōn*] and knowledge makes perfect sense, and that traditional interpretations of the passage centering around “weak” and “strong” groups in the Corinthian church are unfounded. As will become clear, Paul is chiefly concerned with the Corinthians’ taste for idolatry.

### The Economy of Knowledge

That Paul thinks knowledge and love are dichotomous is clear from the way he contrasts them already in verse one. “Knowledge puffs up,” he says, “but love builds up” (8:1). *Gnosis phusioi, agapē oikodomei*. This puffing up versus building up is not merely a feature of English

translation. Each verb carries the idea of “contracting,” though the two constructions are remarkably different in nature. *Phusioō* literally means to inflate (coming from the term for bellows, *phusa*). Yet Paul always uses the term metaphorically (and negatively) for the pride that inflates one’s ego. *Oikodomeō* is the literally the building of a house, an *oikos*. For instance, Matthew uses the term (Mt 7:24) in that well-known parable of two persons who build houses, one on the rock and the other on the sand. Yet the term is used both literally and metaphorically for building in general.

Although Paul doesn’t explicitly “build” his argument on the root of *oikodomeō*, in effect he sets out—both in this verse and throughout the letter—two conflicting economies. The economy of love is an *oikonomia* that is focused on an *oikos*, not a house in this case but the household of faith. But, as we will see, it is also a “stewardship” of that with which one has been entrusted—the right use of something that comes as a gift. Paul clearly would have been aware of the etymological connections between *oikodomeō* and *oikonomia*, though whether he is thinking in terms of two economies *per se* would be hard to argue. Yet such is what he effectively does.

Given that Paul begins chapter seven by saying “now concerning the matters about which you wrote,” commentators generally agree that Paul is responding to a letter or series of letters from the Corinthians.<sup>5</sup> His use of the locution “*peri de*” here and elsewhere in this text indicates that he is responding to a concern raised by the Corinthians. Further, Paul appears to be quoting from the Corinthians’ letter(s) and responding to each point. What makes Paul’s use of quotations complicated is that it is not always clear as to the degree with which he agrees with what the Corinthians write (nor clear as to the degree of what is part of the quotation and what is Paul’s addition). As will become evident, Paul’s use of quotation in the text is often both ironic and critical.

Certainly the first quotation of chapter eight fits that description. Paul quotes back

to the Corinthians something that seems to have been a kind of motto of theirs: “we all know” [*pantes gnōsin exomen*]. But, more than that, he prefaces that motto with the phrase “*oidamen hoti*.” Taken together, the entire phrase “*oidamen hoti pantes gnōsin exomen*” is a meta-epistemological claim: “we know that we know.”<sup>6</sup> Although we could explore exactly how *gnōsis* functions here (for instance, does it denote some esoteric knowledge regarding the true nature of the physical and spiritual realms?), I leave that question aside. Whatever this *gnōsis* may be, the Corinthians clearly think it empowers them—and *that* is what disturbs Paul. While Paul often uses *gnōsis* positively (for example, in I Cor 1:5), here he thinks that it is problematic. Rather than read Paul as including himself in the “we know that,”<sup>7</sup> it seems more likely that Paul is describing the attitude of the Corinthians. That the problem here is not simply “knowing” but a kind of “knowing that one knows” becomes clear in verse two. Paul says: “Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge” The key word here is “*dokeō*,” which means to suppose or think something. In effect, Paul says that, at the very moment you think you “know” you don’t actually know as you ought to know—which is to say you don’t really “know.” Here we have Paul at his enigmatic best. But he is certainly not without precedent in making such a puzzling claim. One cannot help but think of the similarly enigmatic remark Jesus makes to the Pharisees. They say to him: “Surely we are not blind, are we?” He responds: “If you were blind, you would have no sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (Jn 9:40-41).<sup>8</sup> It is not the moment of knowing (or seeing) but the moment of claiming knowledge that is problematic. Not only is the claim disproportional to the actual knowledge they possess, but also *how* they make the claim troubles Paul.

Let us first turn to the “disproportionality” of the claim. At issue here is the status of their knowledge claims—or, put more pointedly, the status they *claim* for those

claims. If one says “*oidamen hoti pantes gnōsin exomen*,” then one is making a very strong claim indeed. The verb *oida* (to know) comes from the root \**eidō* (to see). In Plato’s philosophy, for instance, knowing the *eidōs* (usually translated as “form” or “idea”) of something means that one has grasped it perfectly. To know the *eidōs* is not merely to know the “outward form” of something but to know its “true reality.” When comparing his knowledge of the Father to that of the Pharisees, Jesus claims “you have never heard his voice or seen his form [*eidōs*] (Jn 5:37). In other words, they don’t really “know” the Father. The kind of knowledge that *oida* provides is “comprehension,” as opposed to “apprehension.” Whereas comprehension is to “conceive fully or adequately,”<sup>9</sup> apprehension suggests incompleteness. “Adequately” here does not mean “good enough” but “adequation” in the sense of the medieval phrase *adaequatio intellectus et rei*—a perfect one-to-one correspondence between the mind and the object of thought.<sup>10</sup> *Oida* is often used in this sense of knowing perfectly or fully in the New Testament. Again, in rebuking the Pharisees, Jesus contrasts his knowledge of the Father with theirs by claiming that his is on the order of *oida* (John 8:55). That Paul uses the term “*dokeō*” in the phrase “anyone who claims to know” [*dokei egnōkenai*] shows that he thinks their knowledge claim is no more than an opinion—and a bad one at that.

But there is a second, even if closely related, aspect at stake: *how* those claims are made. It is a common interpretation to suggest that Paul contrasts knowledge and love in verse one with the intention of saying that love needs to temper or inform knowledge. For instance, Augustine says:

Now the Apostle, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says, ‘Knowledge inflates; but love edifies’. The only correct interpretation of this saying is that knowledge is valuable when charity informs it. Without charity, knowledge inflates; that is, it exalts man to

arrogance which is nothing but a kind of windy emptiness.<sup>11</sup>

At the risk of going against “the only correct interpretation,” I want to argue for a distinction between the economy of knowledge and the economy of love.<sup>12</sup> The difference between the two is where each begins, which is to say their respective *grounds*. Whereas the economy of knowledge begins with me, the economy of love begins with the other. Or, to put it another way, while knowledge is something that *I* ground, love is that which the *other* grounds. Precisely that difference explains another strange transition, the one that occurs between verses two and three. In verse two, Paul speaks from the active perspective of the knower. Yet, in verse three, he suddenly reverses perspectives: he now talks (passively) about *being known* by God: “but anyone who loves God is known by him.” Further, it is here that knowledge and love are connected, not in the sense that love “informs” knowledge (*pace* Augustine) but in the sense that love proves to be the possibility condition for knowledge. So there is still knowledge but two significant changes have taken place: first, one only obtains knowledge by way of love and, second, knowledge is fundamentally not about *what I do* but *what God does*. Love is put in first place, with knowledge taking second place. Moreover, God is put in first place, with me taking second place. This reversal in no way destroys subjectivity; rather it makes a proper subjectivity possible—the result being a de-centered self that is grounded upon God.

That Paul thinks there is a distinct difference between the economy of knowledge and the economy of love is already clear from the first chapter of his letter. There he asks (rhetorically): “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1:20). Although Paul does distinguish between “wisdom” and “knowledge” (most notably in I Cor 12:8, in which they are listed as separate gifts of the Spirit), that distinction is irrelevant for the point here. For both the “wisdom” and the

“knowledge” that Paul criticizes in I Corinthians have a *human* basis, meaning that they are grounded on the self. Moreover, both provide license for sinful practices.<sup>13</sup> For Paul, the “wisdom of the world” [*sophia tou kosmou*] includes both the Jewish demand for signs [*semeia*] and the Greek search for wisdom [*sophia*] (1:22). In their place is put a new *logos*, “*ho logos ho tou staurou*” [the *logos* of the cross] (1:18). As Stanislas Breton notes, with the adoption of this new *logos* “we have left the home of Israel just as we have left the home of Greece,” the result being that “the Western thinker is divided from *within*.”<sup>14</sup> Leaving Jerusalem means that we can no longer demand a sign as the requirement of our belief. Leaving Athens means that we give up the demand of *logon didomai*—giving reasons. From the standpoint of the economy of knowledge, then, the *logos* of the cross is truly foolishness. Indeed, the very connection of *logos* with *stauros* [cross] can only be reckoned as folly [*mōria*]. Yet that folly, which has at its heart the kenotic self-emptying of Godself, demonstrates its own sort of strength in that it “shatters the idol of power.”<sup>15</sup> In place of the wisdom of the world is put God’s wisdom, which is “secret and hidden” and “decreed before the ages” (2:7). Such wisdom cannot be “owned” or “mastered.” It is beyond our comprehension.

### A Taste for Idolatry

The strange series of reversals that we noted in verses 1-3 of chapter eight takes place within the context of idolatry—or, more specifically, food sacrificed to idols. And that is not purely coincidental, for there is an important connection between Paul’s claims regarding knowledge and the topic of idolatry. Earlier, we noted the connection between *oida* and \**eidō*, in which seeing for the Greeks is equated with knowing. The word for idol in Greek—*eidōlon*—is linked to both of those terms. Unlike God, the idol—at least in principle—is something we both see and are truly able to grasp (to *comprehend*), for the simple

reason is that we are its creators. As Jean-Luc Marion puts it, “The idol presents itself to man’s gaze in order that representation, and hence knowledge, can seize hold of it.”<sup>16</sup> While Marion is certainly right concerning some idols, idolatry actually turns out to be more complicated than that. For many idols are ones that *others* have created, which is why we find ourselves within a network of idols that is only partially of our own making.<sup>17</sup> Yet, claiming that the idol is in reality “nothing,” the Corinthians feel confident enough to write “we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists’” and “‘there is no God but one’” (8:4). In one sense, the Corinthians are correct. But it is in both the Corinthians’ claim and the *way* in which it is made that Paul detects the threat of two sorts of idolatry. The first sort is the obvious one of partaking (either directly or indirectly) in pagan rites. We’ll turn to that momentarily. But it is the other sort of idolatry—what we might call the idolatry of knowledge or “conceptual idolatry”—that we turn to first. In such idolatry, not only are human claims made too strongly but also those claims foster an arrogance that can lead one to idolatry. *This* sort of idolatry—rather than that of creating or bowing down to graven images—is actually the first recorded in Scripture.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out that in Genesis three we have “the first conversation *about* God, the first religious, theological conversation.”<sup>18</sup> Like all theological conversations, this one depends upon a particular *conception* of God, for there can be no theology without a “*logy*” or a *logos*. It is here that we find the first *misconceptions* of God. But it is also here that human beings develop a *taste* for idolatry.

Consider the opening salvo of the serpent’s seduction of the woman.<sup>19</sup> “Did God [*’elōhim*] say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Gen 3:1) The serpent’s subtle rhetorical twist turns the focus from God’s gracious permission (“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden,” 2:16) to the one and only

prohibition placed on Adam and the woman's liberty ("but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat," 2:18).<sup>20</sup> Given the serpent's characterization, God's nature has already been distorted—a false image of God, as one who prohibits rather than enables, has been put in God's place. To this distortion, the woman responds: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said: 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die'" (3:2). The woman rightly rejects the image of God presented by the serpent, even if she also slightly distorts what God has said by adding "touching" to God's more simple command of "eating" (2:17).<sup>21</sup> In response to the woman's correction, the serpent simply provides a *different* distorted image of God. For the serpent now says: "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing God and evil" (3:4-5). Here we have not merely an image of God as liar but also one that actually reflects the serpent's deceitfulness. Yet this should come as no surprise, for Marion reminds us that the idol serves "as a mirror, not as a portrait; a mirror that reflects the gaze's image."<sup>22</sup> That is exactly what we get from the serpent: a "portrait" of God that is a mirror image of the serpent. Such is the nature of all idolatry, according to Marion.

The idol reflects back to us, in the face of a god, our own experience of the divine. The idol does not resemble us, but it resembles the divinity that we experience, and it gathers it in a god in order that we might see it.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the nature of the conceptual idol is always based upon the nature of the viewer. What we get in idolatry is a "picture" of God that reflects our distorted experience of God. Yet the idolatry does not stop there, for the serpent in effect claims to be able to get into the mind of God and postulate *why* God has made this command. Not only does this theory regarding God's motives presume knowledge the serpent cannot have

(resulting in it being *ungrounded*), it also makes God out to be both petty and envious.

Up until this point, only the serpent is engaged in idolatry. But the hook that draws the woman in is the claim that she "will be like God." It is here that the taste for idolatry (one already latent?) is cultivated. Jacques Derrida speaks of his "taste" for the secret, for whatever can "never be broached/breached."<sup>24</sup> We have a taste for that which is secret precisely because it stands at the edge of our limits. It is the "absolute," that which language cannot express or human reason fathom. We want to invert the order of things, taking ourselves beyond our natural limits. It is *this* taste that the woman has. At the moment that she lusts after the fruit, she has a developed taste for idolatry. She seeks the transcendence of human limitations, enabling her to become like God. Gerhard von Rad describes that desire as follows:

The serpent's insinuation is the possibility of an extension of human existence beyond the limits set for God at creation, an increase in life not only in the sense of pure intellectual enrichment but also familiarity with and power over, mysteries that lie beyond man.<sup>25</sup>

Exactly what this God-like "knowing" [*yd'*] involves is certainly open to debate,<sup>26</sup> but it is instructive that the woman sees the tree as 1) "good for food," 2) "a delight to the eyes," 3) "desired to make one wise." While there is nothing wrong with the first two aspects, it is the woman's taste for knowledge (whether *yd'* or *oida*) that constitutes idolatry. For the delight that Eve experiences is primarily the delight of inverting the proper order of creator and creature and usurping God's place. She lusts after the knowledge that puffs up. The eating of the fruit is merely the satisfaction of that desire. Yet the result of that "puffing up" is a broken fellowship. What had been a perfect relation between human and divine being is broken at the very moment the human wants to become divine. So idolatry begins with a distorted image of God and ends with wanting to *be* God.

The Corinthians likewise have a taste for idolatry, in at least two different (though not unrelated) senses. The most obvious aspect of that taste is the literal taste that appears not to be “idolatrous” at all. Although commentators have often taken the issue in these chapters to be simply about buying idol meat in the market or the possibility of being served it while at dining with friends, the situation faced by the Corinthians was far more complicated than that. For the Corinthians were literally *surrounded* by pagan practices. Imagine an atheist living in the Bible Belt in the 1950’s and you begin to get a kind of reverse perspective. There were all sorts of social occasions—weddings, birthdays, thanksgiving dinners, funerals, holidays—that would have included sacrificial rites or at least prayers as part of the celebration. Moreover, meals were served both in temples as part of pagan ritual and likely also just as “regular” meals.<sup>27</sup> Given that environment, if one wanted to take part in Corinthian social life, one had to make some concessions to pagan practices. And how could one turn down those invitations to lavish parties and dinners given by one’s pagan friends who served such tasty fare, especially if one wanted to get ahead in life? Just as in our society, in the Greco-Roman world one’s status was measured by the company one kept and the people with whom one dined. The Romans actually had a word for a “social climber” who advanced by getting dinner invitations from important persons—*parasitus*.<sup>28</sup> But the Corinthians rationalize that they can continue social life as usual just by thinking “no idol in the world really exists.” Going back to my earlier comparison, it would be like an atheist attending a thanksgiving dinner at the home of Christian friends who begin the meal with a prayer in which they asked God’s blessing upon the food. The atheist thinks: “there’s no god, so the prayer is just meaningless.” Likewise, the Corinthians insist that, since idols don’t really exist, eating idol food shouldn’t be a problem.

While it might appear (from chapter eight) that Paul agrees with them, his

argument in chapter ten makes it clear that he has been parroting back their own beliefs, not necessarily agreeing with them.<sup>29</sup> For, in chapter ten, he claims “what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons [*daimoniōn*] and not to God” (10:20). In other words, it is too simple to say that idols are not just “nothing.” Although an idol does not truly “exist,” Paul thinks that taking part in pagan rites (including meals associated with them) means partaking in “the table of demons” (10:21). On that reading, eating in pagan temples or taking part in meals associated with pagan rites is *truly* idolatrous. For it means that one is taking part in the realm of the demonic and also indirectly affirming the existence of idols.<sup>30</sup> Thus, for the sake of social standing, the Corinthians have become (as Paul so strongly puts it) “partners with demons” (10:20). That Paul thinks they are in danger of idolatry is clear from his warnings in the first part of chapter ten, where he draws a parallel between the ways in which the Israelites continually “tested” God and the ways in which the Corinthians are testing God by their behavior. “We must not put Christ to the test,” warns Paul in 10:9, and asks “are we provoking the Lord to jealousy?” (10:22). Paul thinks the Corinthians’ arrogance has caused them to be so bold as to put God to the test, which is why he says “do not become idolaters as some of them did” (10:6). Idolatry often follows this pattern of “putting God to the test.” We found a similar kind of “testing” of God, in which the serpent suggests that the woman will not actually die, despite God’s warning to that effect. Here the testing of God is by engaging in idolatrous practices.

Yet the Corinthians test God in another sense. Their arrogance does not merely lead to this literal sort of idolatry. It likewise leads to one of a much subtler sort, one that might not even seem to be idolatry at first glance. For the Corinthians have a taste for pushing things to the limits, for seeing just how far they can really go. Again, the taste is for a kind of transcendence. In the same way that “we all know” was one motto for

the Corinthians, “all things are lawful” (6:12 and 10:23) was another. Literally, this could be rendered “I am free to do anything” [*panta moi exestiv*], but we might better capture the *force* of the claim if we translated it—in keeping with current usage—as “we have our rights!” What is at stake here not merely the Corinthians’ *exousia* (right) and *eleutheria* (freedom) but also their absolute *insistence* upon being able to exercise those rights without hindrance. That haughty insistence stands behind Paul’s entire discourse in chapters six through ten. The Corinthians are using their liberty as license to go beyond their limitations as members of the body.

What makes the Corinthians so sure of their rights? It is reasonable to think that Paul himself would have preached a message of freedom from the law when he had been in their midst. After all, his rebuke of the Galatians was that they had let go of their freedom and placed themselves back under the law. So, at least to some degree, Paul is probably the “source” of that view of Christian liberty. Now, though, Paul needs to put the brakes on that liberty. Paul clearly thinks they are abusing it in selfish—and even idolatrous—ways. Once again, Paul takes on an ironic posture, much like that he exhibits in 4:10 where he says: “We are the fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.” That passage almost drips with sarcasm. Paul’s move is first and foremost deflationary. When he writes “not all possess this knowledge” (8:7), it is an inversion of what he had said only a few verses before—*oidamen hoti pantes gnōsin exomen*. As it turns out, we *don’t* all possess knowledge—and that “we” can easily be taken to include the seemingly “strong.” In other words, Paul can be read as suggesting that the Corinthians are not necessarily so strong after all. With that in mind, Paul’s famous warning in chapter ten—“so if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall” (10:12)—should be taken as a rebuke to those who *think* they are strong.

The message is clear: your pretensions to strength may well prove your undoing.

But Paul does not stop with merely undercutting their arrogant claims to “knowledge,” to “knowing the secret.” To correct the abuse of their *exousia* and *eleutheria*, Paul articulates a guideline by invoking the so-called “weak.” Interestingly enough, there is no textual evidence to suggest the existence of any “party” of weaker believers in Corinth, so it is hard to maintain the usual view of this passage: viz., that there were “weak” and “strong” factions in the church at Corinth.<sup>31</sup> If anything, it seems that the Corinthians uniformly consider themselves “strong.” So the example of the weak is not meant as an *actual* case but as the articulation of a guiding principal designed not only to call up the Corinthians short but also to demonstrate what the proper exercise of Christian liberty looks like in practice. By turning to the weak, Paul shows that one’s freedom is not curbed by some law but rather by other members of the body.

As he puts it: “‘All things are lawful’ [quoting the Corinthians], but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful’, but not all things build up. *Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other*” (10:23, my italics).

Here one cannot help but think of the way in which the Emmanuel Levinas argues that it is the *other* who curbs my freedom. “Autonomy or heteronomy?” asks Levinas. “The choice of Western philosophy has most often been on the side of freedom.”<sup>32</sup> Such is certainly choice of the Corinthians, who are insisting on their autonomy. To act with autonomy is literally to be one’s own [*auto*] law [*nomos*]. Yet Levinas calls us to “heteronomous” acting, in which concern for the other curbs our freedom. There is a good reason why Levinas speaks of being “traumatized” by the other in *Otherwise than Being*: for the other’s appearance radically disturbs my egoism and calls my vaunted autonomy into question.<sup>33</sup> In effect, Levinas distinguishes between a natural self, one defined by its egoism of enjoyment, and an ethical self that takes the other into

account.<sup>34</sup> In order to become an ethical self, I must become a self that is directed toward the other, and this requires a radical rethinking of who I am. Levinas says: “The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everyone.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the subject for Levinas is truly a “subject” in the sense of *being subject* to another.<sup>36</sup> And the paradigmatic figures to whom the subject is “subject” are precisely the lowest in terms of strength. “The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated.”<sup>37</sup> In this, as in so many other ways, the economy of love demands that the “first will be last” (Mk 10:31). The result is that “*I am no longer able to have power*: the structure of my freedom is . . . completely reversed.”<sup>38</sup> “Before the Other, the I is infinitely responsible.”<sup>39</sup> What Levinas means by this “infinity” of responsibility is (among other things) that there is no point at which I can draw the line and say: “I’m no longer responsible for you.” Instead, my responsibility extends indefinitely, in the same way that Jesus makes clear that our responsibility to the neighbor has no clear boundaries or limits in the parable of the so-called “good” Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37). I say “so-called,” because Jesus makes it clear that the Samaritan, while “good,” does nothing extraordinary or even particularly commendable. Rather he simply does what a good neighbor would do.<sup>40</sup>

In invoking the weak, Paul is telling a story of what true neighborliness looks like—which is to say a proper exercise of *exousia* and *eleutheria*. And, evidently, Paul had read his Levinas. For he makes it clear that, given the choice of autonomy or heteronomy, I am compelled to choose heteronomy. My responsibility is fundamentally to my neighbor. It is not that I am not free or that I do not have any rights; rather, it is that the boundaries of my freedom and rights are drawn by the mere existence of my neighbor. Moreover, not just *any* members of the body have this effect on us: the *weakest* ones turn out to have the *strongest* claim on us. No doubt, the Corinthians—if they took Paul’s letter

seriously, which is certainly open to question—would have found his claim traumatizing. “I have to turn down those important social invitations *just because* my eating affects someone else?” Paul’s answer to any such objections takes up all of chapter nine. There Paul details his reasons for why he could—if he so chose—exercise his rights not just as a Christian but as an apostle who has actually seen the risen Lord (9:1). Paul’s argument is that it is not his rights that compel him to act as he does but his responsibility. He says: “an obligation is laid on me” and “I am entrusted with a commission” (9:16-17). It is in light of that responsibility that Paul talks about becoming all things to all people. But, of course, such is the truly neighborly thing to do.<sup>41</sup>

What, though, does all of this have to do with idolatry? Paul makes it clear that, in improperly exercising one’s liberty, one sins not merely against one’s neighbor but also “against Christ” (8:12). To say that such believers sin against Christ is really to say that they are guilty of idolatry, because they have allowed themselves a freedom that they simply are not allowed to have. In effect, such persons make themselves out to be “God” by elevating themselves above others. It is the same desire for transcendence found already in Genesis three.

In response to their supercilious claims of “knowledge” and insistence on their *exousia* and *eleutheria*, Paul provides an account of the economy of love, which overcomes knowledge and has its own kind of “wisdom.”

### The Wisdom of Love

**I**nverting the literal meaning of “philosophy”[the love of wisdom], Levinas speaks of “the wisdom of love.” What distinguishes this “wisdom” is that it is “at the *service* of love.”<sup>42</sup> Here Levinas follows the same kind of inversion that we saw earlier in Paul: love takes the place of knowledge, in the sense that it both *founds* knowledge (and *founds us*) and *transcends*

knowledge. “Knowledge puffs up,” says Paul, maybe not always but often. In contrast, love edifies, for love partakes of an entirely different economy than that of knowledge.

The economy of love is the economy of the gift, which is to say an economy that does not begin with us and is in reality no economy at all (in the sense that it does not operate by the usual structure of reciprocity).<sup>43</sup> Earlier, we noted the strange reversal between verses two and three of chapter eight, in which Paul suddenly shifts from our knowing to our being known. That formula of being known by God as preceding our knowledge of God is common in Paul. For instance, in Gal 4:9 Paul begins by saying “Now, however, that you have come to know God” but then he quickly corrects himself by adding “or rather to be known by God.” We think in terms of our “knowing God,” but that—to use Heideggerian language—is a “founded” mode of knowing. Properly speaking, the ground of our knowing is our *being known* by God. In speaking of one day knowing “fully” (whatever that means exactly), Paul describes this state with the phrase “even as I have been fully known” (13:12).<sup>44</sup> But this shift of standpoint from us to God is not just found in Paul’s comments about knowing: it applies universally. Paul says to the Corinthians “all things are yours,” but immediately qualifies that claim by saying “and you are Christ’s” (3:23). In short, our knowing and our having both begin with God’s knowing and having. That we have anything at all is purely a gift.

Much like Levinas, Marion speaks of the other’s claim upon me. Yet this “other” turns out to be the ultimate “Other.” In language clearly reminiscent of that of Levinas, Marion says that we are held in God’s gaze, which means that we are “deposed from any autarchy and taken by surprise.”<sup>45</sup> In effect, God’s call displaces me from being the center of my world. Since the call (vocative) is to *me* (dative), there is no longer an *I* but a *me*. The “I” is no longer the source of reason or even my identity, which “can be proclaimed only when

called—by the call of the other.”<sup>46</sup> In *Reduction and Givenness*, Marion refers to the one called as the “*interloqué*.” But, in *Being Given*, he speaks of the *adonné*, “the gifted.” There he says that the “gift happens to *me* because it precedes *me* originally in such a way that I must recognize that I proceed from it.”<sup>47</sup> In keeping with what Paul says about knowledge (i.e., that it is a gift, 12:8), Marion says “the gifted [*adonné*] does not have language or *logos* as its property, but it finds itself endowed with them.”<sup>48</sup>

The logic of love is that we are first loved. And the love bestowed upon us is the possibility condition of our showing love to others. Thus far, the logic of love makes sense. But, at its very core, it is inscrutable. For the logic of love is the logic of a gamble, of a loss without any assurances of a possible gain, a kenosis. As Marion puts it, “to obey the logic of love, it must not pretend to found itself on a certain assurance.”<sup>49</sup> And yet love persists. The *oikonomia* that constitutes the *oikodomeō* of love that Paul describes is remarkable in its tenacity. In what is clearly meant as a stinging rebuke of the Corinthians, Paul describes precisely how they have *not* been acting:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. *It does not insist on its own way*; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (13:4-7, my italics)

That love “bears,” “believes,” “hopes,” and “endures” *all things* is precisely why Marion calls it an “unconditional surrender,” a surrender that certainly also requires *faith*.<sup>50</sup> No better illustration of the sheer inexplicability of love is that Christ gave himself despite the fact that “his own received him not” (Jn 1:11, KJV). Yet such is the nature of *agapē* that “surpasses all knowledge, with a hyperbole that defines it and, indissolubly, prohibits access to it.”<sup>51</sup> How could one make sense of that which

bears and believes and hopes and endures all things? Love utterly confounds the wisdom of the world. It is no wonder, then, that Heidegger asks: “Will Christian theology one day resolve to take seriously the word of the apostle and thus also the conception of philosophy as foolishness?”<sup>52</sup>

What could be more at odds with the Corinthians’ pretensions to “knowledge” and their insistence upon their *exousia* and *eleutheria* than love? Precisely in *not* being “envious or boastful or arrogant or rude” and in refusing to “insist on its own way,” love does not puff up but edifies. Yet it also escapes idolatry. Whereas the economy of knowledge, with its certainty and insistence upon its *exousia* and *eleutheria*, naturally leads to idolatry, the economy of love leads one in the other direction. For the one who loves neither makes boastful claims about one’s “knowledge” nor seeks to be elevated to a higher station. The one who loves is instead content to be held in God’s loving gaze, not clinging tightly to a knowledge that “will come to an end” but instead basking in the gaze of a love that “never ends” (13:8).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at a Society of Christian Philosophers meeting in conjunction with the Society for Biblical Literature annual conference. Thanks to J. Richardson Middleton (the Old Testament respondent) and Sylvia Keesmaat (the New Testament respondent) for their gracious and insightful comments. Thanks also to the philosophy department of Wheaton College for their help in further refining the paper.

<sup>2</sup> All biblical citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Fee claims that the entire passage of 8:1-6 seems to be a *non sequitur*. But the *non sequitur* actually occurs between the first and second part of verse one. Verses two and three follow Paul’s switch to the theme of knowledge, while verses four through six return us to the original theme of food sacrificed to idols. See Gordon D. Fee, “*Ἐδωλόθητα* Once Again: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8-10,” *Biblica* 16 (1980) 172.

<sup>4</sup> As will become evident, “knowledge” here refers to knowledge of God. My focus is on how this “knowledge” leads to a sense of entitlement on the part of the Corinthians.

<sup>5</sup> For some possible hypotheses on the exact sequence of exchange of letters, see Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 3-4. For an attempt at reconstructing the exchanges, see John C. Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (New York: Seabury, 1965) 290-93.

<sup>6</sup> It is quite possible that the entire phrase—“*oidamen hoti pantes gnosin exomen*”—is from the Corinthians. But what matters here is whether the claim “*oidamen hoti pantes gnosin exomen*” (we know that we know) represents what the Corinthians think about themselves.

<sup>7</sup> Such is Conzelmann’s reading, for example.

<sup>8</sup> This strange saying is preceded by yet another. Right before the Pharisees ask their question, Jesus says “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” (John 9:39). It is in response to *that* statement that the Pharisees pose their question.

<sup>9</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) s.v. “comprehend.”

<sup>10</sup> Of course, medieval philosophers—Thomas, for instance—saw this “*adaequatio*” as a guiding epistemological *telos*, not necessarily a goal that *has been* or necessarily *could be* reached.

<sup>11</sup> Saint Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972) 9.20.

<sup>12</sup> Some might argue that the existence of these contrasting economies actually fits with Augustine’s interpretation. If so, then all the better.

<sup>13</sup> Wisdom and knowledge are woven together in Paul’s discussion in 2:6-16. For more on the relation of wisdom and knowledge in 1 Corinthians, see Michael D. Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001) 92-103.

<sup>14</sup> Stanilas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, trans. Jacquelyn Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 132.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to J. Richard Middleton for this point.

<sup>18</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, trans. and ed. Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 111.

<sup>19</sup> The woman only takes on the name Eve *after* the seduction, and the name is given to her by Adam.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Brueggemann points out that the story of the garden is one in which God gives human beings a vocation, permission, and a prohibition. By deliberately focusing on the prohibition, the serpent distorts what God has said (and thus—I would add—who God is). See Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 46.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, some commentators assume that “touching” is implied by “eating.”

<sup>22</sup> *God without Being* 12.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) 6.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001) 57.

<sup>25</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed., trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 189.

<sup>26</sup> See E.A. Speiser’s discussion in his *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1982) 26. He claims that *yd’* means not merely “know” but the entire process of coming to know. Lyn M. Bechtel, no doubt influenced by structuralism, claims that this knowing is “the capacity to discern the binary oppositions of life.” See her “Rethinking the Interpretation of Genesis 2.4B-3.24,” in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 88.

<sup>27</sup> I am particularly here indebted to Peter D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8-10 in Its Context* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993). Gooch argues that Paul is not primarily addressing sacrificial meat sold in the market. Instead, Paul is concerned with partaking in meals connected to pagan rites. Note that the question is not just one of “meat” (*krea*), since Paul also uses the generic term for food (*brōma*) in 8:13. I find Ben Witherington’s claim that “*εδωλόθτων*” (which he distinguishes from “*ἑρόθτων*”) refers exclusively to meat both sacrificed to idols *and* eaten in the temple to be unconvincing. See his article “Not So Idle Thoughts about *Eidolothuton*,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993) 237-44. Alex T. Cheung makes the important point that, since Paul’s discussion in

Rom 14 is about “unclean” food rather than food sacrificed to idols, one cannot simply take what Paul says in Rom 14 and apply it to I Cor 8-10. See Alex T. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1999) 90.

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion in *Dangerous Food* 40-45.

<sup>29</sup> In 8:4, Paul repeats the Corinthian claim that “no idol in the world really exists,” but he does not necessarily *affirm* it.

<sup>30</sup> Although Peter D. Gooch says that Paul makes no “distinction between food as food and food as instrument of idolatry,” Cheung (rightly) counters by saying that Paul’s concern is not about the food *per se* but the eating of it in a context that seems to affirm the existence of idols (i.e., pagan rituals). Precisely that difference explains why Paul is so vehement in condemning partaking in pagan ritual (10:14-22) and relatively nonchalant about buying food in the market that might (or might not) have been sacrificed to idols (10:25). See *Idol Food in Corinth* 309.

<sup>31</sup> Both Hurd and Fee (following Hurd) take this view and I find their arguments convincing. See *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* 124-25 and “*Ἐδωλόθτων* Once Again” 176, respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 1987) 48.

<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991) 111.

<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 1979) 175.

<sup>35</sup> *Otherwise than Being* 114.

<sup>36</sup> Simon Critchley makes this point in *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity* (New York: Verso, 1999) 51.

<sup>37</sup> *Totality and Infinity* 215.

<sup>38</sup> “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” 55.

<sup>39</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 18.

<sup>40</sup> One might take issue with Levinas for *overemphasizing* our responsibility to the other—and to all others. Surely there are practical limits to what we can do for the other. And surely one has responsibilities (to one’s parents or children) that are special responsibilities. While acknowledging those limits and particular responsibilities is

appropriate, there is a clear danger of dulling the force of both Levinas and Jesus' claim of the other upon me (and thus evading our responsibility).

<sup>41</sup> I should note that there *is* one thing that Paul says which *might* be taken to support the Corinthians' free exercise of their *exousia* and *eleutheria*. In 10:29 he writes: "For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience?" Yet, if that question is set in context, it becomes clear that Paul merely means that our own respective consciences should normally be our guide—*except* when following my conscience does another harm.

<sup>42</sup> *Otherwise than Being* 162.

<sup>43</sup> Whether a gift can truly be "given" has been the subject of heated controversy. Derrida insists that the gift is "the very figure of the impossible," which is why we want it all the more. See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 7. Marion responds by refiguring the gift in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Koskey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), particularly chapter six. John Milbank has attempted to argue for the possibility of gift giving *with* reciprocity as a component by refiguring the notion of reciprocity. See his "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995) 119-61; "The Soul of Reciprocity Part One: Reciprocity Refused," *Modern Theology* 17 (2001) 335-91; and "The Soul of Reciprocity Part Two: Reciprocity Granted," *Modern Theology* 17 (2001) 485-507. Here I will assume that, while gift giving is a rather complicated enterprise, gifts truly can be given. But it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an argument for that stance.

<sup>44</sup> For an interesting attempt to make sense of Paul's claim "For we only know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end" (13:9-10), see Paul W. Gooch, *Partial Knowledge: Philosophical Studies in Paul* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), particularly chapter seven.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson

(Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998) 201.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* Whereas one of Marion's strategies for making sure the gift remains truly a gift is by making sure the call remains unidentified (particularly in chapter six of *In Excess*), Scripture identifies God—though on God's own terms.

<sup>47</sup> *Being Given* 270.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>49</sup> *God without Being* 194.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 101.

<sup>51</sup> *God without Being* 108.

<sup>52</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics?'" in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 288.