THE

Logic

OF THE

Gift

Toward an Ethic of Generosity

Edited by
Alan D. Schrift

Gift, Gift

Marcel Mauss

The two meanings of “present” and “poison,” into which this single word has diverged in the different Germanic languages, seem so far removed from each other that etymologists find it difficult to explain the passage from one to the other and their common origin. The very destiny of the word differs according to the languages, the meaning of poison being almost the only one to be kept in modern German, the sense of present and endowment being the only one to be maintained in English, Dutch having two words, one being neuter, the other feminine for indicating the poison and the present or dowry respectively. Here, one sense has eroded, there another, and nowhere is the semantic derivation clear. As far as I see it in the great etymological dictionaries of German and English, the Murray and the Kluge, no satisfactory explanation has been provided for it. The important remarks made by Hirt concerning the German gift, however, have to be taken into account. It is indeed clear that gift “poison” is a euphemism resulting from a taboo concerning a word one was reluctant to use: just like in Latin venenum corresponds to *pensumum “Liebestrank.” But why is it precisely the word gift and the idea of bestowal it evokes that have been chosen as symbols of poison? That is what still remains to be explained.

Now, for the sociologist and for the historian of Germanic law, the filiation of these meanings offers no difficulty.

For the benefit of clarity, we ask the reader to allow us to touch on a few principles that have not yet become well-known enough to make it unnecessary for us to explain them again.

In the Germanic world, the social system that I have proposed to call a “system of total prestations” [“système des prestations totales”] has particularly flourished. In this system, which is not only juridical and political but economical and religious as well, clans, families, and individuals create bonds through perpetual services and counter-services of all kinds, usually in the form of free gifts and services of a religious nature or otherwise.

After having believed for a long time that this system has been wide-

spread only in backward societies, we now see that it exists in a large part of the ancient legal systems of European societies. In particular the groups forming the ancient Germanic societies create bonds through marriages, through daughters-in-law and sons-in-law, through the children born from both lineages, nephews, cousins, grandfather and grandson, raised with one another, some fed by others, some served by others, etc.—by military services and initiations, enfronings and the festivities they give rise to;—by deaths, funerary meals and successions, usufructs, the reciprocation of gifts they entail;—by gratuitous gifts, usurious loans returned or to be returned. An unceasing circling of both goods and persons, of permanent and temporary services, of honors and feasts given, returned and to be returned, this is how one has to imagine a good part of the social life of the ancient peoples of Germany and Scandinavia.

Other ancient European societies, for instance the Celts, have further developed other elements of those rites and those ancient legal systems. The theme of rivalry, that of single combat, that of emulating extravagant spending, of challenges and tournaments has been exacerbated in the Gallic, Welsh, and Irish countries. These societies clearly practice the form of total prestations of an agonistic type we have proposed to name “pot-latch,” after the Chinook and the jargon of the traders and the American Indians, and to the juridical aspects of which Mr. Darcy has drawn attention. We know that these particular forms have been well developed in the American Northwest and in Melanesia. Potlatch in the strict sense of the word is not foreign to the customs of the ancient Germans and Scandinavians either.

But it is the gift, the pawn that is most interesting to study with these societies. Indeed, the Gabe, the gift [la on la gift], the present appears there with more pronounced features; it is more clearly visible there than in many other types of societies and certainly more than in other Indo-European societies. The German language in particular has quite an extremely rich range of words and of words invented for expressing its different kinds of nuances, from Gabe and Misgift to Morgengabe, Liebesgabe, Abgabe, and the curious Trotsgabe.
from him, it gives him power over the other who accepts it. In the case where the prestation provided is not rendered in the prescribed juridical, economical, or ritual form, the giver obtains power over the person who has participated in the feast and has taken in its substances, the one who has married the girl or has bound himself by blood relations, the beneficiary who uses an object enchanted with the whole authority of the giver.

The chain of these ideas is particularly evident in the Germanic legal system and languages, and one can easily see how the two senses of the word *gift* are integrated in it. Indeed, the typical prestation for the ancient Germans and Scandinavians is the gift of drink, of beer; in German, the present *par excellence* is what one pours (Geschenk, Gezengeschenk). It would be unnecessary to refer here to a very substantial number of topics of Germanic law and mythology. But one can see that the uncertainty about the good or bad nature of the presents could have been nowhere greater than in the case of the customs of the kind where the gifts consisted essentially in drinks taken in common, in libations offered or to be rendered. The drink presented can be a poison; in principle, with the exception of a dark drama, it isn’t; but it can always become one. It is always a charm anyway (the word “gift” has kept this meaning in English) which permanently links those who partake and is always liable to turn against one of them if he would fail to honor the law. The kinship of meaning linking gift-presence to gift-poison is therefore easy to explain and natural.

There are, moreover, other words belonging to this legal system that also possess, in the Germanic lands, this ambiguity. The pawless as well, in ancient law, to this mutual charm. Mr. Huvelin has, in a classical paper, suspected the origin of the legal tie comparable to the Latin *nexum*, to reside in this magical exchange. Let’s make this more clear. The *gage*, *wage*, *wadium*, *vadi*, that creates a bond between master and servant, creditor and debtor, buyer and seller is a magical and ambiguous thing. It is at the same time good and dangerous; it is thrown at the feet of the contracting party in a gesture that is at the same time one of confidence and of prudence, of distrust and of defiance. Oddly enough, this is still the most solemn way of exchanging among the bold navigators and tradersmen of the Melanesian Trobriand Islands. And it is the reason why one still speaks in English of “throwing the gage” for throwing down the gauntlet.

Besides, all these ideas have two faces. In other Indo-European languages it is the notion of poison that is uncertain. Kluge and the etymologists rightly compare the series *potio* “poison” and *gift*, *gift*. It is still worthwhile to read the agreeable discussion of Aulus Gellius on the ambiguity of the Greek *φάρμακον* and the Latin *venenum*. For the *Lex Cornelia de Sicariis et Veneficiis*, of which Cicero fortunately has preserved the very “recitation,” still specifies *venenum malum*. The magic potion, the delicious charm, can be either good or bad. Neither is the Greek *φάρμακον* necessarily a sinister term, and the drink of friendship, of love, is only dangerous if the enchanter wants it to be so.

These conclusions are only a technical and philological elaboration concerning a single fact that will be mentioned only later. For it is part of an ensemble of observations taken from all sorts of law systems, of magics, of religions and economies of all kinds of societies, from the Melanesian and Polynesian and North American to our own morality. On this matter and without leaving the field of the Germanists, one could call to mind one of Emerson’s essays: *On Gifts and Presents* [in] points out very well the pleasure and the displeasure we still feel when receiving presents. One will find an account of all these facts in a work on “the obligation to return presents,” to be published in the first issue of the new series of *l’Année sociologique*.

First published in *Mélanges offerts à M. Charles Anérl par ses amis et ses élèves* [1924].


Translated by Koen Decoster for this volume.

Notes

1. Kluge feels that the same thing must have happened to these words as has happened to *vergeben*, *vergiften*. *Etymol. Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Strassburg: Trubner, 8. verbesserte und verm. Aufl.), p. 171.  


5. I’m alluding here to “fostering” and similar customs.  

6. In a forthcoming issue of the *Revue celtique*, one will find notes by Mr. Hubert and Mr. Mauss on this topic [EN: *Revue celtique* 42 (1925)].  

Gift and Exchange in the Indo-European Vocabulary

Émile Benveniste

It was the very great contribution of Marcel Mauss, in his now classic Essai sur le don, to have revealed the functional relationship between gift and exchange and to have defined thereby a whole group of religious, economic, and judicial phenomena belonging to archaic societies. He showed that the gift is only one element in a system of reciprocal prestations which are at once free and constraining, the freedom of the gift obliging the recipient to a counter-gift, which engenders a continuous flow of gifts offered and gifts given in return. Here is the principle of an exchange which, generalized not only between individuals but also between groups and classes, stimulates the circulation of wealth throughout the entire society. The game is determined by rules that become fixed in institutions of all sorts. A vast network of rites, celebrations, contracts, and rivalries organizes the mechanics of these transactions.

The demonstration made by Mauss was based primarily upon archaic societies, which furnished him with a mass of conclusive evidence. If one seeks to verify this mechanism in ancient societies, particularly in the Indo-European world, convincing examples become much more rare. It is true that Mauss himself described an archaic form of contract among the Thracians, and he also discovered in ancient India and Germany traces of analogous institutions. In addition, one must allow for chance discoveries, always possible in this vast domain in which the investigation has not been systematically pursued. The fact remains that these societies are much more difficult to explore and that, as far as usable documents are concerned, one cannot count on a large amount of sure and specific evidence, if one wishes it to be explicit.

We do have nevertheless some less apparent facts, which are all the more valuable for not having run the risk of being distorted by conscious interpretations. These are the facts presented by the vocabulary of the Indo-European languages. One cannot use them without an elaboration based on the comparison of attested forms. But that comparison will result in conclusions which will supply to a rather large degree the absence of evi-
dence for the most ancient periods of our societies. Several examples will be brought forth and analyzed in order to obtain whatever information they can offer about the prehistoric notions of gift and exchange.

In most Indo-European languages, “to give” is expressed by a verb from the root *dō- which also has a large number of nominal derivatives. There seemed to be no possible doubt about the constancy of this signification until it was established that the Hittite verb dā- meant not “give” but “take.” This caused considerable confusion, which still lasts. Should Hittite dā- be considered a different verb? We cannot assume this without misgivings. Must we, on the other hand, admit that the original sense of *dō- was “take,” faithfully preserved in Hittite dā- as well as in Indo-Iranian ā- “receive”? This would reverse the problem without making it any easier; it would remain to be explained how “give” could have come from “take.” In reality the problem seems insoluble if we seek to derive “take” from “give” or “give” from “take.” But the problem is wrongly put. We shall consider that *dō- properly means neither “take” nor “give” but either the one or the other, depending on the construction. It must have been employed like English “take,” which permits two opposed meanings: “to take something from someone” but also “to take something to someone, to deliver something to someone.” Cf. also, “to betake oneself, to go”; besides, in Middle English, taken meant “to deliver” as well as “to take.” Similarly, *dō- indicated only the fact of taking hold of something; only the syntax of the utterance differentiated it as “to take hold of in order to keep” (= take) and “to take hold of in order to offer” (= give). Each language made one of these acceptations prevail at the expense of the other in order to construct the antithetical and distinct expressions for “taking” and “giving.” Accordingly, in Hittite dā- means “take” and is opposed to pāi- “give,” while in most of the other languages it is *dō- which means “give,” and a different verb which assumes the meaning of “take.” Some traces of the double possibility survive; even though the distribution was fixed in Indo-Iranian, the verb dā- “to give,” with the preverb ā- indicating movement toward the subject, means “to receive.”

It seems, then, that the most characteristic verb for “to give” was marked by a curious semantic ambivalence, the same sort of ambivalence affecting more technical expressions like “buy” and “sell” in Germanic (Germ. kaufen: verkaufen) or “borrow” and “lend” in Greek (ἀνάλημα: δανείον). “To give” and “to take” thus proclaim themselves here, in a very ancient phase of Indo-European, as notions that were organically linked by their polarity and which were susceptible of the same expression.

Now *dō- is not the only example of this. For a long time there has been a question about the etymology of the verb for “take” in Germanic: Goth. niman, Germ. nehmen, which assumes a root *nem-. One would naturally think of relating it to Gr. νεμω. Comparatists have always refused to do this, claiming that there was a difference in meaning. But the meaning must be defined with some precision before it can be decided if it is really an obstacl to the relationship. The Greek verb νέμω has the two values of “to give legally as an allotment” (Διὸς νέμετε δομοί θεός... [Od. 16 188] and “to have legally as an allotment” (πόλεως νέμει) [Hdt. 1. 59]). In Gothic niman does indeed mean “to take” in various acceptations. But a compoun of this verb is of special interest: it is arbi-numja “heir,” lit. “the one who takes (= receives) the inheritance.” Now the Greek term that arbi-numja translates is κηρήνη “heir.” Is it chance that (κηρήνη) and (arbi

numja) are formed from νέμω in Greek and from niman in Gothic? Here we have hold of the missing link which allows us to join the meanings which his tory has separated. Goth. niman means “to take,” not in the sense of “to take hold of” (which is greipan, Gr. greifen) but in the sense of “to receive” and more exactly, of “to receive as an allotment, into possession,” which is precisely the same as one of the two acceptations of Gr. νέμω. The connection between νέμω and niman is now restored, and is confirmed by the ambivalence of *nem-, which indicates anattribution as given or as received.

Let us now turn to the very notion of “gift” in the form which is the most constant throughout most of the Indo-European languages. We observe that, in general, nominal forms derived from *dō- were used. Now it happens—and this fact has been barely noticed—that within a single language, several of these derivatives will be employed simultaneously, being differentiated by their suffixes. The coexistence of these “synonyms” should arouse attention and call for a strict verification, first because they are not synonyms and, more especially, because the simplicity of a notion such as “gift” would not seem to require multiple expressions.

Ancient Greek had no fewer than five distinct and parallel words for “gift,” *dō-, and our dictionaries and translations render them identically as “gift, present”: δῶς, δῶσε, δῶρον, δωρεά, δωρίνη. We must try to define each one of them specifically by virtue of its formation. The first, δῶς, has only one example, in Hesiod: δῶς, ἄγαθος, ἄρτας, δῶρον ἀρχή “to give is good, to ravish is evil” (Works 384); a root word which, like ἀρχή must have been an invention of the poet for an expression as simple and as little differentiated as possible for “gift.” In δῶς the notion is presented as an effective accomplishment; it is the act of giving susceptible of being realized in a gift: καὶ οἱ δῶσοι ἐστὰν ὑθήθη (the one who will devote himself), we shall give him a precious gift” (II. 10. 213). This time, the gift is promised in advance, designated in detail, and is to compensate a bold deed. The next two, δῶρον and δωρεά must be taken together: the first, δῶρον, is indeed the gift of generosity, of gratitude, or of homage, which is incorporated into the object offered; and δωρεά properly designates, as
an abstraction, “the providing of presents” (cf. Hdt. 3. 97) or the “totality of presents” (ibid. 3. 84), whence the adverbial use ἐν τοῖς “in the manner of a present, gratuitously.” Aristotle defines δώρα πρίγι μετ' ἀμφοτέρων ἀμφότερον (Top. 125a. 18), a δόσεως that does not impose the obligation of a gift in return. Finally there remains the most significant term, δωτὴν, which is also a gift but of a completely different sort. The δωτὴν, in Homer, is the obligatory gift offered to a chief whom one wishes to honor (Il. 9. 155. 297) or the gift that due one as a guest; Ulysses, received by Polyphemus, feels he has a right to count on the δωτὴν, which is a part of the duties of hospitality: μὴ τοῖς μοι δωτηκόντων ἢ καὶ ἄλλως ἡ δοσίς δωτῆς ἀμφότερος ἢ καὶ ἄλλως ἡ δοσίς δωτῆς ἀμφότερος (Od. 9. 267). ALCIN. welcoming Ulysses at his home, does not wish to let him leave without having brought together the whole δωτὴν that is meant for him: οὕτως καὶ ἐπόθεν τὴν δωτὴν παρασκεύασε (Od. 11. 351). The uses of the word in Herodotus confirm this technical sense. A man, wishing to befriend the husband of a woman whom he desires, offers him as a δωτὴν any of his possessions that the husband might desire, but on condition of reciprocity (Hdt. 6. 62). One cannot emphasize more clearly the functional value of the δωτὴν, of this gift that obliges a gift in return. This is the invariable sense of the word in Herodotus; whether the δωτὴν is intended to call forth a gift in return or whether it serves to compensate for a previous gift, it always includes the idea of reciprocity: it is the gift that a city is compelled to give the person who has done it a service (1. 61); the gift sent to a people in order to engage their friendship (1. 69). WENHAUS (2. 180) “to collect the δωτὴν in the form of voluntary contributions from the cities towards a common work.” In an inscription from Calauria, δωτὴν relates to the “rent” due in kind from one who has obtained a concession of land (IG. 4. 841. 11; third century B.C.). We have in δωτὴν the notion of a gift in return or a gift which calls for a return. The mechanism of the reciprocity of the gift is revealed by its very meaning and is related to a system of offerings of homage or hospitality.

Up to this point we have considered words whose sense brought them to our attention immediately. But a valid inquiry must and can go well beyond the terms that have an explicit reference to the gift. There are some which are less apparent, not immediately obvious, and which sometimes can be recognized only by certain particular qualities in the meaning. Others preserve their proper value in only one part of the Indo-European domain. We must make use of both in order to reconstruct this complex prehistory.

An obvious joins the notion of the gift to that of hospitality. But one must distinguish among the terms relating to hospitality. The etymology of some of them, like Greek ἔνθος, is not certain. The study of the word is thus involved with that of the institution and should be left to the historian of Hellenic society. More interesting are the terms whose evolu-
which surround it can be seen. The primary meaning of *hostis* is indeed the one Festus gives it: not just any "foreigner" but the foreigner who is *pari
isue cum populo Romano. Hostis* thereby takes on the meaning of both "for-

ginner" and "guest." The equal rights that he enjoyed with respect to the Roman
citizen were connected with his status as a guest. Hostis is properly
one who compensates and enjoys compensation, one who obtains from
Rome the counterpart of the advantages which he has in his own country
and the equivalent of which he owes in his turn to the person whom he pays
reciprocally. This old relationship was weakened, then abolished, as the sta-
tus of *civis* came to be more rigorously defined and the *civitas* became the
sole and ever stricter norm of judicial participation in the Roman com-
nunity. The relationships regulated by personal or family agreements were wiped
out in the face of rules and duties imposed by the state; *hostis* then became
the "foreigner" and then the "public enemy" by a change in meaning that is
connected with the political and judicial history of the Roman state.

Through *hostis* and the related terms in early Latin we can discern a cer-
tain type of *compensatory offering* that is the basis of the notion of "hospital-
ity" in the Latin, Germanic, and Slavic societies; equality of status
transposes into law the parity between persons confirmed by reciprocal gifts.

In order to approach a different aspect of the same notions, we shall
resort to another Latin word whose meaning has been more stable but also
more complex. An entire Indo-European phenomenon of "exchange," of
which fragments survive in the numerous forms derived from the root
*mei-, might be traced through and around *munus*. We should study in par-
cular the Indo-Iranian notion of *mitra*, the contract and the god of the
contract, a term whose authentic meaning largely overlaps that of the "con-
tract." It is the equivalent in the human world of what the *tsa* is in the cos-
mic world, that is, the principle of total reciprocity that bases human society
on rights and obligations to the point that the same expression (Sansk. *drush, 
Av. *drug*) indicates the one who violates the *mitra* and the one who trans-
gresses the *tsa*. This profound and rich expression takes on a particular
acceptation in Lat. *munus*. In literary use, *munus* means "function, office,"
or "obligation" or "task" or "favor" or, finally, "public spectacle, gladiatorial
contest," all acceptations relating to the social sphere. The formation of
*munus* is characteristic in this regard; it contains the suffix *nes-" which, as
Meillet correctly observed, is attached to designations of a social or judicial
nature (cf. *pignus, funus, funus, facinus*). The unity of meanings in *munus*
found in the notion of respects paid or service accomplished, and this itself
goes back to what Festus defined as a *domum quod officiis causa datur. In
accepting a *munus*, one contracts an obligation to repay it publicly by a dis-
tribution of favors or privileges, or by holding games, etc. The word con-
tains the double value of a charge conferred as a distinction and of
donations imposed in return. Here is the basis of "community," since com-
munis signifies literally "one who shares in the munia or munera"; each
member of the group is compelled to give in the same proportion as he
receives. Charges and privileges are the two faces of the same thing, and this
alternation constitutes the community.

An "exchange" which is constituted of "gifts" accepted and returned is
something quite different from utilitarian commerce. It must be generous
in order to be judged profitable. When one gives, he must give the most
precious thing he has. This is what can be learned from certain terms that are
etymologically of the same family as *munus*: O Irish *main, moin, which
means "present" and "precious thing," and especially Goth. *maiþs*
worth noticing that Goth. *maiþs* is not a gift in the sense that English
"gift" would express. This word appears in the translation of Mark 7: 11, to
render *dôrōv, but as the equivalent of the Hebrew word *kôpēvah "offering
to the Treasure of the Temple." The choice of *maiþs* shows that in
Gothic as in the other Germanic languages, the present of exchange must be
of signal value.

A comparison of vocabulary will reveal to us an institution analogous to
the ones we have just discussed, but not so obvious. It is a type of donation
almost abolished in historical societies and which we can only rediscover by
interpreting the rather dissimilar significations of a group of words derived
from "dāp: Lat. *dāps* "sacred banquet," O.Icc. *tāfn* "sacrificial animal,"
Arm. *tawm" "feast," Gr. *dōkōn* "expense" (cf. *dēnrio "break to pieces,
consume, destroy"), and also Lat. *dānum" "damage" (*dāp-nom*). The
religious sense of some of these terms is clear. But in each of them the
meaning has been narrowed down to only one particular aspect of a repre-
sentation which goes beyond the sphere of the sacred and is realized in the
domains of law and economy as well.

As the nucleus of the meaning we shall set up the notion of "expense" as
a manifestation both religious and social: a festive and sumptuous expense,
an offering that consists of a large consumption of food, made for prestige
and as a "pure loss." This definition seems to account for all the special
acceptations arising from the fragmentation of an archaic conception. The
Roman *dāps* was a banquet offered to the gods, a real banquet with roast
meat and wine which the participants ceremoniously consumed after hav-
ing desacralized it. The antiquity of this rite can be seen in the formulae
that consecrated it; according to Cato, these prayers were addressed to
Jupiter: *Jupiter dāpalis, quod tibi fieri oportet, in domo familia mea cul-
ignam vini dapi, eius rei ergo macee hac illace dape pollucenda esto... Jupiter
dāpalis, macee isitate dape pollucenda esto* (Cato Agr. 132). The use of pol-
lucere with daps emphasizes the magnificence of it: the verb always accompanies splendid consecrations in the ancient religious vocabulary. This can actually be seen in Ovid (Fasti 5. 515ff) when the poor peasant Hyrieus offers Jupiter, who is visiting him, a whole ox, his only possession, as a daps. Moreover, ancient derivatives of daps confirm the fact that this word implied largesse and associate it with festive banquets of hospitality: “daps ose acceptos dicebant antiqui, signifcantes magnificae, et dapsicum negotium amplum ac magnificum” (Festus). The verb dapsinare, whether it is connected with daps or whether it is an adaptation of Gr. δαπανάω, signifies, in the only example of it that survives, “to treat royally at the table”: aeternum tibi dapsinabo victum, si vera autemam (Pl. Capt. 897).

In Greek, δαπανή, of which, in general, only the commonplace acceptance of “expense” is retained, also implies largesse, an expense for display and prestige, although the term is no longer restricted to religious use. In Herodotus (2. 169), δαπανή signifies “sumptuous ornamentation” in the decoration of a building. Pindar (Isthm. 4. 29) provides a significant use of it: παγελικάνεοι δ’ αρχήναι δαπανή χαίρον “(the competitors in the games) in rivalry with the peoples of all Hellas took pleasure in expenditures on horses.” It really is, in effect, an expense of rivalry and prestige. If a new proof is necessary, it will be found in the sense of the adjective δαπαλής “abundant, splendid,” which passed into Latin, in which dapsilis “magnificent, sumptuous,” is associated secondarily with daps and renews an ancient etymological connection. The verb δαπανάω means “to spend,” but it must be understood in a stronger sense: “to spend” here means “to consume, to destroy”; cf. δαπανήρος “prodigal, extravagant.” Hence, with the strict notion of a “sacrifice with food” (Lat. daps, O.Ice. tafn) and of “feast” (Arm. aewn) must be associated the idea of an ostentatious prodigality which is at the same time the consumption of food and the destruction of wealth. This clarifies the word damnare, so curiously separated from this semantic group. In damnare, there remains only the sense of “damage suffered,” of material and especially pecuniary loss: it is the “expense” imposed upon someone and no longer consented to freely, the “loss” which is prejudicial and no longer a voluntary sacrifice; in short, a detriment or a penalty instead of a magnificent squandering. Jurists, who were also peasants, thus narrowed and reduced to a penalty what had been the sign of largesse and generosity. Whence damnare “damnore afficere, to impose a fine, and in general, “to condemn.”

All these features help us perceive, in an Indo-European prehistory which is not so ancient, a socioreligious phenomenon of which we still retain many traces in our vocabulary today. In English we say “to give a reception” and in French “offrir un banquet”; there are “expenses” of food and “sacrifices” of possessions made as social obligations and as fulfillments of the duty of hospitality. This analysis leads us finally to recognize, in the Indo-European world, the institution known as potlatch. It does not seem that the ancient classical societies knew that aggravated form of potlatch that several writers, Mauss in particular, have described among the Kwakiutl or the Haida, or those extravagant challenges in which chiefs who were jealous of their prestige provoked one another to enormous destructions of wealth. But the fact still remains that the terms analyzed here refer to a custom of the same type as the potlatch. Although the theme of rivalry no longer appears, the essential features are really the same: the feast with an abundance of food, the expense which is purely ostentatious and intended to maintain rank, the festive banquet—all this would have no sense if those who had the profit of this largesse were not committed to requite it by the same means. Moreover, it is chance that the term potlatch is related in essence to offerings of food and means literally, “to nourish, to consume.” Among all the varieties of potlatch, this must have been the most usual in societies in which the authority and the prestige of the chiefs were maintained by the largesse they distributed and from which they benefited in turn.

It would be easy to extend these considerations further, either by pursuing the etymological relations of the terms examined, or, on the other hand, by studying the different Indo-European expressions for notions that are apparently identical. One example will show in what unpredictable form the notion of “exchange” may be revealed.

As one might guess, “exchange” gives rise to a large vocabulary for specifying economic relations. But terms of this type have almost always been renewed, so that we must consider each language for itself. There is, however, one term which is at least fairly widespread in Indo-European and which is unvarying in meaning: it is the one that properly designates “value.” It is represented by Gr. ἄξαρθον, Sans. arth- “to have worth, to be worthy” (cf. arha “deserving”) also Av. arza-, Lth. alyga “price, wages.” In Indo-Iranian and in Lithuanian, the sense appears to be rather general and abstract, not lending itself to a more precise determination. But in Greek, ἄξαρθον allows for a more exact interpretation than the dictionaries indicate in rendering it by “to earn, to yield.”

In Homer, ἄξαρθον means indeed “to get a profit,” but this sense is connected to a well-defined situation: the profit in question is the one that a captive brings to the man who sells him. It suffices to enumerate the Homeric examples. In order to move Achilles to pity, when he is ready to kill him, Lycaon implores him: “You once took me and led me to be sold at the market at Lemnos, where I brought you the price of a hundred oxen” ἐκοσομβολον δε τοι ἠλον (II. 21. 79). About a little slave who is offered for sale: “he will bring you a thousand times his price” δ’ ὑμίν μυριον ὀκνον ἀλοη (Od. 15. 453). Melantheus threatens to sell Eumaeus far from
Ithaca “so that he will bring me a good living” ἵνα μοι βλέπων πολύν ἀλφαὶ (Od. 17. 250), and the suitors invite Telemachus to sell his guests at the market in Sicily “where they will bring you a good price” δὲν καὶ τοιούτου ἀλφαὶ (Od. 20. 383). There is no variation in the meaning of the verb and the full force of it is found in the epithet that describes maidens: παρθένοις ἀλφαίοιοι they “bring in oxen” for their father who gives them in marriage.

“Value” is characterized, in its ancient expression, as a “value of exchange” in the most material sense. It is the value of exchange that a human body possesses which is delivered up for a certain price. This “value” assumes its meaning for whoever disposes of a human body, whether it is a daughter to marry or a prisoner to sell. There we catch a glimpse, in at least one part of the Indo-European domain, of the very concrete origin of a notion connected to certain institutions in a society based on slavery.†

Translated by Mary Elisabeth Meck.

Notes

3. Just as Fr. partager means “to give as a share” and “to have as a share.”
4. There are other proofs of this: O. Irish gaibim “take, have,” corresponds to Germ. geben “give”; while O. Slav. kere means “I take,” the same form in Irish, doibh, means “I give,” etc. These terms are affected by an apparent instability which in reality reflects the double value inherent in verbs with this sense. Etymologists often refuse to admit these opposed meanings or try to retain only one, thus rejecting obvious parallels and spoiling the interpretation.
5. There is even a sixth, δώμα, but it is late and need not detain us.
†. EN: Benveniste’s citation appears incorrectly in the English translation as Od. II. 267.
7. This meaning of δώκιμον, once fixed, helps to settle a philological problem. We read in Herodotus 6. 89 that the Corinthians, by way of friendship, ceded to the Athenians some ships with the “symbolic” price of five drachmas, “because their law forbade a completely free gift” δώκιμον (var. δωρήν) γὰρ ἐν τῷ νόμῳ σῶμαι δέχθαι. The sense of a “free gift,” which is that of δωρήν, not of δώκιμον, should cause the adoption of the reading δωρήν of ABCP, in opposition to the editors (Kallenberg, Hude, Legrand) who admit δωκίμον, following DBSV.
††. EN: I would like here to acknowledge the assistance of Rodney L. Ast in checking all the Greek citations (several of which were transcribed erroneously in the English translation) against Benveniste’s French text, and Joseph Cummins for checking Benveniste’s citations against the original Greek and Latin sources.
The Spirit of the Gift

Marshall Sahlins

Marcel Mauss’s famous *Essay on the Gift* becomes his own gift to the ages. Apparently completely lucid, with no secrets even for the novice, it remains a source of an unending ponderation for the anthropologist du métier, compelled as if by the *bau* of the thing to come back to it again and again, perhaps to discover some new and unsuspected value, perhaps to enter into a dialogue which seems to impute some meaning of the reader’s but in fact only renders the due of the original. This chapter is an idiosyncratic venture of the latter kind, unjustified moreover by any special study of the Maori or of the philosophers (Hobbes and Rousseau especially) invoked along the way. Yet in thinking the particular thesis of the Maori *bau* and the general theme of social contract reiterated throughout the *Essay*, one appreciates in another light certain fundamental qualities of primitive economy and polity, mention of which may forgive the following overextended commentary.

"Explication de Texte"

The master concept of the Essai sur le don is the indigenous Maori idea *bau*, introduced by Mauss as “the spirit of things and in particular of the forest and the game it contains…” (1950, p. 158). The Maori before any other archaic society, and the idea of *bau* above all similar notions, responded to the central question of the *Essay*, the only one Mauss proposed to examine “à fond”: “What is the principle of right and interest which, in societies of primitive or archaic type, requires that the gift received must be repaid? What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?” (p. 148).

The *bau* is that force. Not only is it the spirit of the foyer, but of the donor of the gift; so that even as it seeks to return to its origin unless replaced, it gives the donor a mystic and dangerous hold over the recipient.

Logically, the *bau* explains only why gifts are repaid. It does not of itself address the other imperatives into which Mauss decomposed the process of reciprocity: the obligation to give in the first place, and the obligation to receive. Yet by comparison with the obligation to reciprocate, these aspects Mauss treated only summarily, and even then in ways not always detached from the *bau*: “This rigorous combination of symmetrical and opposed rights and duties ceases to appear contradictory if one realizes that it consists above all of a melange of spiritual bonds between things which are in some degree souls, and individuals and groups which interact in some degree as things” (p. 163).

Meanwhile, the Maori *bau* is raised to the status of a general explanation: the prototypical principle of reciprocity in Melanesia, Polynesia, and the American northwest coast, the binding quality of the Roman *præsidium*, the key to gifts of cattle in Hindoo India—"What you are, I am; become on this day of your essence, in giving you I give myself" (p. 248).

Everything depends then on the “texte capitale” collected by Elsdon Best (1909) from the Maori sage, Tamati Ranapiri of the Ngati-Raukawa tribe. The great role played by the *bau* in the *Essay on the Gift*—and the repute it has enjoyed since in anthropological economics—stems almost entirely from this passage. Here Ranapiri explained the *bau* of *taonga*, that is, goods of the higher spheres of exchange, valuables. I append Best’s translation of the Maori text (which he also published in the original), as well as Mauss’s rendering in French.

Best, 1909, p. 439:

I will now speak of the *bau*, and the ceremony of whangai *bau*. That *bau* is not the *bau* (wind) that blows—not at all. I will carefully explain to you. Suppose that you possess a certain article, and you give that article to me, without price. We make no bargain over it. Now, I give that article to a third person, who, after some time has elapsed, decides to make some return for it, and so he makes me a present of some article. Now, that article that he gives me is the *bau* of the article I first received from you then gave to him. The goods that I received for that item I must hand over to you. It would not be right for me to keep such goods for myself, whether they be desirable items or otherwise. I must hand them over to you, because they are a *bau* of the article you gave me. Were I to keep such an equivalent for myself, then some serious evil would befall me, even death. Such is the *bau*, the *bau* of personal property, or the forest *bau*. Enough on these points.

Mauss, 1950, pp. 158–159:

Je vais vous parler du *bau*... Le *bau* n’est pas le vent qui souffle. Pas du tout. Supposons que vous possédez un article déterminé (*taonga*) et que vous me donnez cet article; vous me donnez sans prix fixé. Nous ne faisons pas de marché à ce propos. Or, je donne cet article à une
Mauss complained about Best’s abbreviation of a certain portion of the original Maori. To make sure that we would miss nothing of this critical document, and in the hope further meanings might be gleaned from it, I asked Professor Bruce Biggs, distinguished student of the Maori, to prepare a new interlinear translation, leaving the term “bau,” however, in the original. To this request he responded most kindly and promptly with the following version, undertaken without consulting Best’s translation:  

Na, mo te hau o te ngaaherehere. Taau mea te hau, ebara i te mea Now, concerning the hau of the forest. This hau is not the hau
ko te hau e pupuhi nei. Kaaore. Maaku e aata whaka maarama ki a koe. that blows (the wind). No. I will explain it carefully to you.

Na, he taonga toon ka hoomai e koe mooku. Kaaore aa taaua whakaritenga Now, you have something valuable which you give to me. We have no
uto mo toa taonga. Na, ka hoatu boki e ahau mo te tekehi atu tangata, aa, agreement about payment. Now, I give it to someone else, and,
ku roa peaa te waa, aa, ka mahara taua tangata kei a ia vaa taug taonga a long time passes, and that man thinks he has the valuable,
kia hoomai he utu ki a waa, aa, ka hoomai e ia. Na, ko taua taonga he should give some repayment to me, and so he does so. Now, that
i hoomai nei ki a waa, ko te hau teena o te taonga i hoomai ra ki a aa valuable which was given to me, that is the hau of the valuable which was
i mua. Ko taua taonga me hoatu e ahau ki a koe. E kore given to me before. I must give it to you. It would not
rwa e tika kia kaiponutia e ahau mooku; abakoa taonga pai rwa, taonga be correct for me to keep it for myself, whether it be something very good,
kino raanei me tae rwa taua taonga i a u ki a koe. No te mea he hau or bad, that valuable must be given to you from me. Because that valuable
no te taonga teenaa taonga na. Ki te mea kia kaiponutia e ahau taaua taonga is a hau of the other valuable. If I should hang onto that valuable
mooku, ka mato ahau. Koina te hau, hau taonga for myself, I will become mato. So that is the hau—bau of valuables,

hau ngaaherehere. Kaata teena. hau of the forest. So much for that.

Concerning the text as Best recorded it, Mauss commented that—despite marks of that “esprit théologique et juridique encore imprécis” characteristic of Maori—“it offers but one obscurity: the intervention of a third person.” But even this difficulty he forthwith clarified with a light gloss:

But in order to rightly understand this Maori jurist, it suffices to say: “Taonga and all strictly personal property have a hau, a spiritual power. You give me a taonga, I give it to a third party, the latter gives me another in return, because he is forced to do so by the hau of my present; and I am obliged to give you this thing, for I must give back to you what is in reality the product of the hau of your taonga.” (1950, p. 159)

Embodying the person of its giver and the hau of its forest, the gift itself, on Mauss’s reading, obliges repayment. The receiver is beholden by the spirit of the donor; the hau of a taonga seeks always to return to its homeland, inexorably, even after being transferred hand to hand through a series of transactions. Upon repaying, the original recipient assumes power in turn over the first donor; hence, “la circulation obligatoire des richesses, tributs et dons” in Samoa and New Zealand. In sum:

... it is clear that in Maori custom, the bond of law, bond by way of things, is a bond of souls, because the thing itself has a soul, is soul. From this it follows that to present something to someone is to present something of oneself.... It is clear that in this system of ideas it is necessary
to return unto another what is in reality part of his nature and substance; for, to accept something from someone is to accept something of his spiritual essence, of his soul; the retention of this thing would be dangerous and mortal, not simply because it would be illicit, but also because this thing which comes from a person, not only morally but physically and spiritually—this essence, this food, these goods, movable or immovable, these women or these offspring, these rite or these communions—give a magical and religious holiness over you. Finally, this thing given is not inert. Animate, often personified, it seeks to return to what Hertz called its "froy d'origine" or to produce for the clan and the earth from which it came some equivalent to take its place. (op. cit., p. 161)

The Commentaries of Lévi-Strauss, Firth, and Johansen

Mauss's interpretation of the hau has been attacked by three scholars of authority, two of them experts on the Maori and one an expert on Mauss. Their critiques are surely learned, but none I think arrives at the true meaning of the Rapaniri text or of the hau.

Lévi-Strauss debates principles. He does not presume to criticize Mauss on Maori ethnography. He does, however, question the reliance on an indigenous rationalization: "Are we not faced here with one of those instances (not altogether rare) in which the ethnologist allows himself to be mystified by the native?" (Lévi-Strauss, 1950, p. 38.) The hau is not the reason for exchange, only what one people happen to believe is the reason, the way they represent to themselves an unconscious necessity whose reason lies elsewhere. And behind Mauss’s fixation on the hau, Lévi-Strauss perceived a general conceptual error that regrettably arrested his illustrious predecessor short of the full structuralist comprehension of exchange that the Essay on the Gift had itself so brilliantly prefigured: "like Moses leading his people to a promised land of which he would never contemplate the splendor" (p. 37). For Mauss had been the first in the history of ethnology to go beyond the empirical to a deeper reality, to abandon the sensible and discrete for the system of relations; in a unique manner he had perceived the operation of reciprocity across its diverse and multiple modalities. But, alas, Mauss could not completely escape from positivism. He continued to understand exchange in the way it is presented to experience—fragmented, that is to say, into the separate acts of giving, receiving, and repaying. Considering it thus in pieces, instead of as a unified and integral principle, he could do nothing better than to try to glue it back again with this "mystic cement," the hau.

Firth likewise has his own views on reciprocity, and in making them he scores Mauss repeatedly on points of Maori ethnography (1959, pp. 418-21). Mauss, according to Firth, simply misunderstood the hau, which is a difficult and amorphous concept, but in any event a more passive spiritual principle than Mauss believed. The Rapaniri text in fact gives no evidence that the hau passionately strives to return to its source. Nor did the Maori generally rely on the hau acting by itself to punish economic delinquency. Normally in the event of a failure to reciprocate, and invariably for theft, the established procedure of restitution or restitution was witchcraft (makuta); witchcraft initiated by the person who had been bilked, usually involving the services of a "priest" (sobanga), if operating through the vehicle of the goods detained. Furthermore, adds Firth, Mauss confused types of hau that in the Maori view are quite distinct—the hau of persons, that of lands and forests, and that of taonga—and on the strength of this confusion he formulated a serious error. Mauss simply had no warrant to gloss the hau of the taonga as the hau of the person who gives it. The whole idea that the exchange of gifts is an exchange of persons is sequitur to a basic misinterpretation. Rapaniri had merely said that the good given by the third person to the second was the hau of the thing received by the second from the first. The hau of persons was not at issue. In supposing it was, Mauss put his own intellectual refinements on Maori mysticism. In other words, and Lévi-Strauss notwithstanding, it was not a native rationalization after all; it was a kind of French one. But as the Maori proverb says, "the troubles of other lands are their own" (Best, 1922, p. 30).

Firth for his part prefers secular to spiritual explanations of reciprocity. He would emphasize certain other sanctions of repayment, sanctions noted by Mauss in the course of the Essay.

The fear of punishment sent through the hau of goods is indeed a supernatural sanction, and a valuable one, for enforcing repayment of a gift. But to attribute the scrupulousness in settling one’s obligations to a belief in an active, detached fragment of personality of the donor, charged with nostalgia and vengeful impulses, is an entirely different matter. It is an abstraction which receives no support from native evidence. The main emphasis of the fulfillment of obligation lies, as the work of Mauss himself has suggested, in the social sanctions—the desire to continue useful economic relations, the maintenance of prestige and power—which do not require any hypothesis of recondite beliefs to explain. (1959, p. 421) 6

The latest to apply for entrance to the Maori "house of learning," J. Frytz Johansen (1954), makes certain clear advances over his predecessors
Marshall Sahlins

in the reading of the Ranapiri text. He at least is the first to doubt that the old Maori had anything particularly spiritual in mind when he spoke of the hau of a gift. Unfortunately, Johansen’s discussion is even more labyrinthal than Tamati Ranapiri’s, and once having reached the point he seems to let go, searches a mythical rather than a logical explanation of the famous exchange à trois and ends finally on a note of scholarly despair.

After rendering due tribute and support to Firth’s critique of Mauss, Johansen observes that the word hau has a very wide semantic field. Probably several homonyms are involved. For the series of meanings usually understood as “life principle” or something of the sort, Johansen prefers as a general definition, “a part of life (for example, an object) which is used ritually in order to influence the whole,” the thing serving as hau varying according to the ritual context. He then makes a point that hitherto had escaped everyone’s notice—including, I think, Best’s. Tamati Ranapiri’s discourse on gifts was by way of introduction to and explanation of a certain ceremony, a sacrificial repayment to the forest for the game birds taken by Maori fowlers. Thus the informant’s purpose in this expositing passage was merely to establish the principle of reciprocity, and “hau” there merely signifies “counter-gift”—“the Maori in question undoubtedly thought that hau means countergift, simply what is otherwise called utu” (Johansen, 1954, p. 118).

We shall see momentarily that the notion of “equivalent return” (utu) is inadequate for the hau in question; moreover, the issues posed by Ranapiri transcend reciprocity as such. In any event, Johansen, upon taking up again the three-party transaction, dissipated the advance he had made. Unaccountably, he credited the received understanding that the original donor performs magic on the second party through the goods the latter received from the third, goods that become hau in this context. But since the explication is “not obvious,” Johansen found himself compelled to invoke a special unknown tradition, “to the effect that when three persons exchanged gifts and the intermediary party failed, the counter-gift which had stopped with him might be hau, i.e., might be used to bewitch him.” He then finished gloomily: “However a certain uncertainty is involved in all these considerations and it seems doubtful whether we shall ever attain to actual certainty as regards the meaning of the hau” (ibid., p. 118).

The True Meaning of the Hau of Valuables

I am not a linguist, a student of primitive religions, an expert on the Maori, or even a Talmudic scholar. The “certainty” I see in the disputed text of Tamati Ranapiri is therefore suggested with due reservations. Still, to adopt the current structuralist incantation, “everything happens as if” the Maori was trying to explain a religious concept by an economic principle, which Mauss promptly understood the other way around and thereupon proceeded to develop the economic principle by the religious concept. The hau in question really means something on the order of “return on” or “product of,” and the principle expressed in the text on naunga is that any such yield on a gift ought to be handed over to the original donor.

The disputed text absolutely should be restored to its position as an explanatory gloss to the description of a sacrificial rite. Tamati Ranapiri was trying to make Best understand by this example of gift exchange—an example so ordinary that anybody (or any Maori) ought to be able to grasp it immediately—why certain game birds are ceremoniously returned to the hau of the forest, to the source of their abundance. In other words, he added a transaction among men parallel to the ritual transaction he was about to relate, such that the former would serve as paradigm for the latter. As a matter of fact, the secular transaction does not prove directly comprehensible to us, and the best way to understand it is to work backwards from the exchange logic of the ceremony.

This logic, as presented by Tamati Ranapiri, is perfectly straightforward. It is necessary only to observe the sage’s use of “mauri” as the physical embodiment of the forest hau, the power of increase—a mode of conceiving the mauri that is not at all idiosyncratic, to judge from other writings of Best. The mauri, housing the hau, is placed in the forest by the priests (tohunga) to make game birds abound. Here then is the passage that followed that on the gift exchange—in the intention of the informant, as night follows day.

I will explain something to you about the forest hau. The mauri was placed or implanted in the forest by the tohunga [priests]. It is the mauri that causes birds to be abundant in the forest, that they may be slain and taken by man. These birds are the property of, or belong to, the mauri, the tohunga, and the forest: that is to say, they are an equivalent for that important item, the mauri. Hence it is said that offerings should be made to the hau of the forest. The tohunga (priests, adepts) eat the offering because the mauri is theirs: it was they who located it in the forest, who caused it to be. That is why some of the birds cooked at the sacred fire are set apart to be eaten by the priests only, in order that the hau of the forest-products, and the mauri, may return again to the forest—that is, to the mauri. Enough of these matters. (Best, 1909, p. 439)

In other words, and essentially: the mauri that holds the increase-power (hau) is placed in the forest by the priests (tohunga); the mauri causes
game birds to abound; accordingly, some of the captured birds should be ceremoniously returned to the priests who placed the mauri; the consumption of these birds by the priests in effect restores the fertility (hau) of the forest (hence the name of the ceremony, whangai hau, “nourishing hau”).

Immediately then, the ceremonial transaction presents a familiar appearance: a three-party game, with the priests in the position of an initiating donor to whom should be rendered the returns on an original gift. The cycle of exchange is shown in Figure 4.1.

![Figure 4.1](image)

Now, in the light of this transaction, reconsider the text, just preceding, on gifts among men. Everything becomes transparent. The secular exchange of taonga is only slightly different in form from the ceremonial offering of birds, while in principle it is exactly the same—thus the didactic value of its position in Ranapir’s discourse. A gives a gift to B who transforms it into something else in an exchange with C, but since the taonga given by C to B is the product (hau) of A’s original gift, this benefit ought to be surrendered to A. The cycle is shown in Figure 4.2.

![Figure 4.2](image)

The meaning of hau one disengages from the exchange of taonga is as secular as the exchange itself. If the second gift is the hau of the first, then the hau of a good is its yield, just as the hau of a forest is its productiveness. Actually, to suppose Tamati Ranapir meant to say the gift has a spirit which forces repayment seems slight the old gentleman’s obvious intelligence. To illustrate such a spirit needs only a game of two persons: you give something to me; your spirit (hau) in that thing obliges me to reciprocate. Simple enough. The introduction of a third party could only unduly complicate and obscure the point. But if the point is neither spiritual nor reciprocity as such, if it is rather that one man’s gift should not be another man’s capital, and therefore the fruits of a gift ought to be passed back to the original holder, then the introduction of a third party is necessary. It is necessary precisely to show a turnover: the gift has had issue; the recipient has used it to advantage. Ranapir was careful to prepare this notion of advantage beforehand by stipulating the absence of equivalence in the first instance, as if A had given B a free gift. He implies the same, moreover, in stressing the delay between the reception of the gift by the third person and the repayment—“a long time passes, and that man thinks that he has the valuable, he should give some repayment to me.” As Firth observes, delayed repayments among Maori are customarily larger than the initial gift (1959, p. 422); indeed, it is a general rule of Maori gift exchange that, “the payment must if possible be somewhat in excess of what the principle of equivalence demanded” (ibid., p. 423). Finally, observe just where the term hau enters into the discussion. Not with the initial transfer from the first to the second party, as well it could if it were the spirit in the gift, but upon the exchange between the second and third parties, as logically it would if it were the yield on the gift. The term “profit” is economically and historically inappropriate to the Maori, but it would have been a better translation than “spirit” for the hau in question.

Best provides one other example of exchange in which hau figures. Significantly, the little scene is again a transaction à trois.

I was having a flax shoulder-cape made by a native woman at Rua-tahuna. One of the troopers wished to buy it from the weaver, but she firmly refused, lest the horrors of hau whiia descend upon her. The term hau whiia means “averted hau.” (1900–01, p. 198)

Only slightly different from the model elaborated by Tamati Ranapir, this anecdote offers no particular difficulty. Having commissioned the cape, Best had the prior claim on it. Had the weaver accepted the trooper’s offer, she would have turned this thing to her own advantage, leaving Best
with nothing. She appropriates the product of Best's cape; she becomes subject to the evils of a gain unrightfully turned aside, "the horrors of hau whisia." Otherwise said, she is guilty of eating hau—kai hau—for in the introduction to this incident Best had explained.

Should I dispose of some article belonging to another person and not hand over to him any return or payment I may have received for that article, that is a hau whisia and my act is a kai hau, and death awaits, for the dread terrors of makutu [witchcraft] will be turned upon me (1900-01, pp. 197-98).

So as Firth observed, the hau (even if it were a spirit) does not cause harm on its own initiative; the distinct procedure of witchcraft (makutu) has to be set in motion. It is not even implied by this incident that such witchcraft would work through the passive medium of hau, since Best, who was potentially the deceived party, had apparently put nothing tangible into circulation. Taken together, the different texts on the hau of gifts suggest something else entirely: not that the goods withheld are dangerous, but that withholding goods is immoral—and therefore dangerous in the sense the deceiver is open to justifiable attack. "It would not be correct to keep it for myself," said Ranapiri, "I will become mate (ill, or die)."

We have to deal with a society in which freedom to gain at others' expense is not envisioned by the relations and forms of exchange. Therein lies the moral of the old Maori's economic fable. The issue he posed went beyond reciprocity: not merely that gifts must be suitably returned, but that returns rightfully should be given back. This interpretation it is possible to sustain by a judicious selection among the many meanings of hau entered in H. Williams's (1921) Maori dictionary. Hau is a verb meaning to "exceed, be in excess," as exemplified in the phrase kei te hau te wharika nei ("this mat is longer than necessary"); likewise, hau is the substantive, "excess, parts, fraction over any complete measurement." Hau is also "property, spoils." Then there is haumi, a derivative meaning to "join," to "lengthen by addition," to "receive or lay aside"; it is also, as a noun, "the piece of wood by which the body of a canoe is lengthened."

The following is the true meaning of Tamati Ranapiri's famous and enigmatic discourse on the hau of tuonga:

I will explain it carefully to you. Now, you have something valuable which you give to me. We have no agreement about payment. Now, I give it to someone else, and, a long time passes, and that man thinks he has the valuable, he should give some repayment to me, and so he does so. Now, that valuable which was given to me, that is the product of [hau] the valuable which was given to me [by you] before. I must give it to you. It would not be right for me to keep it for myself, whether it be something good, or bad, that valuable must be given to you from me. Because that valuable is a return on [hau] the other valuable. If I should hang onto that valuable for myself, I will become ill [or die].

The Larger Significance of Hau

Returning now to the hau, it is clear we cannot leave the term merely with secular connotations. If the hau of valuables in circulation means the yield thereby accrued, a concrete product of a concrete good, still there is a hau of the forest, and of man, and these do have spiritual quality. What kind of spiritual quality? Many of Best's remarks on the subject suggest that the hau-as-spirit is not unrelatable to the hau-as-material-returns. Taking the two together, one is able to reach a larger understanding of that mysterious hau.

Immediately it is clear that hau is not a spirit in the common animistic sense. Best is explicit about this. The hau of a man is a quite different thing from his wairua, or sentient spirit—the "soul" of ordinary anthropological usage. I cite from one of Best's most comprehensive discussions of wairua:

In the term wairua (soul) we have the Maori term for what anthropologists style the soul, that is the spirit that quits the body at death, and proceeds to the spirit world, or hovers about its former home here on earth. The word wairua denotes a shadow, any unsubstantial image; occasionally it is applied to a reflection, thus it was adopted as a name for the animating spirit of man. . . . The wairua can leave the sheltering body during life; it does so when a person dreams of seeing distant places or people. . . . The wairua is held to be a sentient spirit; it leaves the body during sleep, and warns its physical basis of impending dangers, of ominous signs, by means of the visions we term dreams. It was taught by high-grade native priests that all things possess a wairua, even what we term inanimate objects, as trees and stones. (Best, 1924, vol. 1, pp. 299-301)

Hau, on the other hand, belongs more to the realm of animism than animism. As such it is bound up with mauri, in fact, in the writings of the ethnographic experts, it is virtually impossible to distinguish one from the other. Firth desairs of definitively separating the two on the basis of Best's
overlapping and often corresponding definitions—"the blurred outline of the distinction drawn between hau and mauri by our most eminent ethnographic authority allows one to conclude that these concepts in their immaterial sense are almost synonymous" (Firth, 1959, p. 281). As Firth notices, certain contrasts sometimes appear. In reference to man, the mauri is the more active principle, "the activity that moves within us." In relation to land or the forest, "mauri" is frequently used for the tangible representation of an incorporeal hau. Yet it is clear that "mauri" too may refer to a purely spiritual quality of land, and, on the other hand, the hau of a person may have concrete form—for example, hair, nail clippings, and the like used in witchcraft. It is not for me to unscramble these linguistic and religious mysteries, so characteristic of that Maori "esprit théologique et juridique encore imprécis." Rather, I would emphasize a more apparent and gross contrast between hau and mauri, on one side, and wairua on the other, a contrast that also seems to clarify the learned words of Tamati Ranapiri.

Hau and mauri as spiritual qualities are uniquely associated with fecundity. Best often spoke of both as the "vital principle." It is evident from many of his observations that fertility and productivity were the essential attributes of this "vitality." For example (the italics in the following statements are mine):

The hau of land is its vitality, fertility and so forth, and also a quality which we can only, I think, express by the word prestige. (Best, 1900–01, p. 193)

The abi iaitoa is a sacred fire at which rites are performed that have for their purpose the protection of the life principle and fruitiness of man, the land, forests, birds, etc. It is said to be the mauri or hau of the home. (p. 194)

... when Hape went off on his expedition to the south, he took with him the hau of the kumara [sweet potato], or, as some say, he took the mauri of the same. The visible form of this mauri was the stalk of a kumara plant, it represented the hau, that is to say, the vitality and fertility of the kumara. (p. 196; cf. Best, 1925, pp. 106–107)

The forest mauri has already received our attention. We have shown that its function was to protect the productivity of the forest. (p. 6)

Material mauri were utilized in connection with agriculture; they were placed in the field where crops were planted, and it was a firm belief that they had a highly beneficial effect on the growing crops. (1922, p. 38)

Now, the hau and mauri pertain not only to man, but also to animals, land, forests and even to a village home. Thus the hau or vitality, or productivity, of a forest has to be very carefully protected by means of certain very peculiar rites... For fecundity cannot exist without the essential hau. (1909, p. 436)

Everything animate and inanimate possesses this life principle (mauri): without it naught could flourish. (1924 vol. 1, p. 306)

So, as we had in fact already suspected, the hau of the forest is its fecundity, as the hau of a gift is its material yield. Just as in the mundane context of exchange hau is the return on a good, so as a spiritual quality hau is the principle of fertility. In the one equally as in the other, the benefits taken by man ought to be returned to their source, that it may be maintained as a source. Such was the total wisdom of Tamati Ranapiri.

"Everything happens as if" the Maori people knew a broad concept, a general principle of productivity, hau. It was a category that made no distinctions, of itself belonging neither to the domain we call "spiritual" nor that of the "material," yet applicable to either. Speaking of valuables, the Maori could conceive hau as the concrete product of exchange. Speaking of the forest, hau was what made the game birds abound, a force unseen but clearly appreciated by the Maori. But would the Maori in any case need to so distinguish the "spiritual" and the "material"? Does not the apparent "imprecision" of the term hau perfectly accord with a society in which "economic," "social," "political," and "religious" are indiscriminately organized by the same relations and intermixed in the same activities? And if so, are we not obliged once more to reverse ourselves on Mauss's interpretation? Concerning the spiritual specifics of the hau, he was very likely mistaken. But in another sense, more profound, he was right. "Everything happens as if" hau were a total concept. Kaati eena.

Political Philosophy of the Essay on the Gift.

For the war of every man against every man, Mauss substitutes the exchange of everything between everybody. The hau, spirit of the donor in the gift, was not the ultimate explanation of reciprocity, only a special proposition set in the context of a historic conception. Here was a new version of the dialogue between chaos and covenant, transposed from the explication of political society to the reconciliation of segmentary society. The Essai sur le don is a kind of social contract for the primitives.

Like famous philosophical predecessors, Mauss debates from an original condition of disorder, in some sense given and pristine, but then overcome
dialectically. As against war, exchange. The transfer of things that are in some degree persons and of persons in some degree treated as things, such is the consent at the base of organized society. The gift is alliance, solidarity, communion—in brief, peace, the great virtue that earlier philosophers, Hobbes notably, had discovered in the State. But the originality and the verity of Mauss was exactly that he refused the discourse in political terms. The first consent is not to authority, or even to unity. It would be too literal an interpretation of the older contract theory to discover its verification in nascent institutions of chieftainship. The primitive analogue of social contract is not the State, but the gift.

The gift is the primitive way of achieving the peace that in civil society is secured by the State. Where in the traditional view the contract was a form of political exchange, Mauss saw exchange as a form of political contract. The famous “total prestation” is a “total contract,” described to just this effect in the *Manuel d’ethnographie*:

We shall differentiate contracts into those of total prestation and contracts in which the prestation is only partial. The former already appear in Australia; they are found in a large part of the Polynesian world and in North America. For two clans, total prestation is manifest by the fact that to be in a condition of perpetual contract, everyone owes everything to all the others of his clan and to all those of the opposed clan. The permanent and collective character of such a contract makes it a veritable traité, with the necessary display of wealth vis-à-vis the other party. The prestation is extended to everything, to everyone, at all times. . . . (1967, p. 188)

But as gift exchange, the contract would have a completely new political realization, unforeseen and unimagined in the received philosophy and constituting neither society nor State. For Rousseau, Locke, Spinoza, Hobbes, the social contract had been first of all a pact of society. It was an agreement of incorporation: to form a community out of previously separate and antagonistic parts, a superperson of the individual persons, that would exercise the power subtracted from each in the benefit of all. But then, a certain political formation had to be stipulated. The purpose of the unification was to put end to the strife born of private justice. Consequently, even if the covenant was not as such a contract of government, between ruler and ruled, as in medieval and earlier versions, and whatever the differences between the sages over the locus of sovereignty, all had to imply by the contract of society the institution of State. That is to say, all had to insist on the alienation by agreement of one right in particular: pri-

vate force. This was the essential clause, despite that the philosophers went on to debate its comprehensiveness: the surrender of private force in favor of a Public Power.

The gift, however, would not organize society in a corporate sense, only in a segmentary sense. Reciprocity is a “between” relation. It does not dissolve the separate parties within a higher unity, but on the contrary, in correlating their opposition, perpetuates it. Neither does the gift specify a third party standing over and above the separate interests of those who contract. Most important, it does not withdraw their force, for the gift affects only will and not right. Thus the condition of peace as understood by Mauss—and as in fact it exists in the primitive societies—has to differ politically from that envisioned by the classic contract, which is always a structure of submission, and sometimes of terror. Except for the honor accorded to generosity, the gift is no sacrifice of equality and never of liberty. The groups allied by exchange each retain their strength, if not the inclination to use it.

Although I opened with Hobbes (and it is especially in comparison with *Leviathan*16 that I would discuss *The Gift*), it is clear that in sentiment Mauss is much closer to Rousseau. By its segmentary morphology, Mauss’s primitive society rather returns to the third stage of the *Discours sur l’Inégalité* than to the radical individualism of a Hobbesian state of nature (cf. Cazanave, 1968). And as Mauss and Rousseau had similarly seen the oppositions as social, so equally their resolutions would be sociable. That is, for Mauss, an exchange that “extends to everything, to everyone, to all time.” What is more, if in giving one gives himself (*bau*), then everyone spiritually becomes a member of everyone else. In other words, the gift approaches even in its enigmas that celebrated contract in which, “Chacun de nous met en commun sa personne et toute sa puissance sous la suprême direction de la volonté générale; et nous recevons en corps chaque membre comme partie indivisible du tout.”

But if Mauss is a spiritual descendant of Rousseau, as a political philosopher he is akin to Hobbes. Not to claim a close historic relation with the Englishman, of course, but only to detect a strong convergence in the analysis: a basic agreement on the natural political state as a generalized distribution of force, on the possibility of escaping from this condition by the aid of reason, and on the advantages realized thereby in cultural progress. The comparison with Hobbes seems to best bring out the almost concealed scheme of *The Gift*. Still, the exercise would have little interest were it not that this “problématicque” precisely at the point it makes juncture with Hobbes arrives at a fundamental discovery of the primitive polity. And where it differs from Hobbes it makes a fundamental advance in understanding social evolution.
Political Aspects of The Gift and Leviathan

In the perspective of Mauss, as it was for Hobbes, the understructure of society is war. This in a special sense, which is sociological.

The "war of every man against every man," spectacular phrase, conceals an ambiguity; or at least in its insistence on the nature of man it ignores an equally striking structure of society. The state of nature described by Hobbes was also a political order. True that Hobbes was preoccupied with the human thirst for power and disposition to violence, but he wrote too of an allocation of force among men and of their liberty to employ it. The transition in Leviathan from the psychology of man to the pristine condition seems therefore at the same time continuous and discontinuous. The state of nature was sequitur to human nature, but it also announced a new level of reality that as polity was not even describable in the terms of psychology. This war of each against all is not just the disposition to use force but the right to do so, not merely certain inclinations but certain relations of power, not simply a passion for supremacy but a sociology of dominance, not only the instinct of competition but the legitimacy of the confrontation. The state of nature is already a kind of society.17

What kind? According to Hobbes, it is a society without a sovereign, without "a common Power to keep them all in awe." Said positively, a society in which the right to give battle is retained by the people in severality. But this must be underlined: it is the right that endures, not the battle. The emphasis is Hobbes's own, in a very important passage that carried the war of nature beyond human violence to the level of structure, where rather than fighting it appears as a period of time during which there is no assurance to contrary, and the will to contend is sufficiently known:

For WARRE, consisteth not in Battell onely, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the Will to contend by Battell is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of Time, is to be considered in the nature of Warre; as it is in the nature of Weather. For as the nature of Foule weather, lyeth not in a shower or two of rain; but in an inclination thereto of many dayes together; So the nature of Warre, consisteth not in actual fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary. All other time is PEACE.

(Part 1, Chapter 13)

Happily, Hobbes frequently used the archaic spelling, "Warre," which gives us the opportunity of taking it to mean something else, a determinate political form. To repeat, the critical characteristic of Warre is free recourse to force: everyone reserves that option in pursuit of his greater gain or glory, and in defense of his person and possessions. Unless and until this partite strength was rendered to a collective authority, Hobbes argued, there would never be assurance of peace; and though Mauss discovered that assurance in the gift, both agreed that the primitive order is an absence of law; which is the same as saying that everyone can take the law into his own hands, so that man and society stand in continuous danger of a violent end.

Of course, Hobbes did not seriously consider the state of nature as ever a general empirical fact, an authentic historic stage—although there are some people who "live to this day in that brutish manner," as the savages of many places in America, ignorant of all government beyond the lustful concord of the small family. But if not historical, in what sense was the state of nature intended?

In the sense of Galilean logic, it is sometimes said: a thinking away of the distorting factors in a complex appearance to the ideal course of a body moving without resistance. The analogy is close, but insofar as it slighted the tension and the stratification of the complex appearance, it perhaps does not do justice, neither to Hobbes nor to the parallel in Mauss. This "Warre" does exist, if it is only that people "lock their doors behind" and princes are in "constant jealousy." Yet though it exists, it has to be imagined because all appearance is designed to repress it, to overlay and deny it as an insupportable menace. So it is imagined in a way that seems more like psychoanalysis than physics: by probing for a hidden substructure that in outward behavior is disguised and transfigured into its opposite. In that event, the deduction of the pristine state is not a direct extension of experimental approximations, still consistent with the empirical even as it is projected beyond the observable. The real is here counterposed to the empirical, and we are forced to understand the appearance of things as the negation rather than the expression of their truer character.

In just this manner, it seems to me, Mauss posited his general theory of the gift on a certain nature of primitive society, nature not always evident—but that exactly because it is contradicted by the gift. It was, moreover, a society of the same nature: Warre. The primitive order is a contrived agreement to deny its inherent fragility, its division at base into groups of distinct interest and matched strength, clanic groups "like the savage people in many places of America," that can join only in conflict or else must withdraw to avoid it. Of course, Mauss did not begin from Hobbesian principles of psychology. His view of human nature is certainly more nuanced than that "perpetual and restless desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death."18 But his view of social nature was an anarchy of group poised against group with a will to contend by battle that is sufficiently
known, and a disposition thereto during all that time there is no assurance to the contrary. In the context of this argument, the *huau* is only a dependent proposition. That supposed adoption by the ethnologist of a native rationalization is itself, by the scheme of *The Gift*, the rationalization of a deeper necessity to reciprocate whose reason lies elsewhere: in threat of war. The compulsion to reciprocate built into the *huau* responds to the repulsion of groups built into the society. The force of attraction in things thus dominates the attractions of force among men.

Less spectacular and sustained than the argument from *huau*, that from Warre nevertheless reappears persistently in *The Gift*. For Warre is contained in the premises, constructed by Mauss in the very definition of "total prestation": those exchanges, "undertaken in seemingly voluntary guise...but in essence strictly obligatory, on pain of private or open warfare" (1950, p. 151; emphasis mine). Similarly: "To refuse to give or to fail to invite is, like refusing to accept, equivalent to a declaration of war; it is to refuse alliance and communion" (pp. 162–63).

Perhaps it strains the point to insist on Mauss’s appreciation of the potlatch as a sort of sublimated warfare. Let us pass on to the concluding paragraphs of the essay, where the opposition between Warre and exchange is developed with progressive amplitude and clarity, first in the metaphor of the Pine Mountain Corroboree, finally in a general statement that begins...

All the societies we have described above, except our own European, are segmentary societies. Even the Indo-Europeans, the Romans before the *Twelve Tables*, the Germanic societies until very late—up to the Edda—Irish society until the time of its principal literature, all were still based on clans, or at the least great families, more or less undivided internally and isolated from one another externally. All these societies are or were far removed from our own degree of unification, as well as from that unity with which they are endowed by inadequate historical study. (1950, p. 277)

From this organization, a time of exaggerated fear and hostility, appears an equally exaggerated generosity:

When, during tribal feasts and ceremonies of rival clans and of families that intermarry or initiate reciprocally, groups visit each other; even when, among more advanced societies—with a developed law of "hospitality"—the law of friendship and contracts with the gods have come to assure the "peace" of the "market" and the towns; for a very long period of time and in a considerable number of societies, men confront each other in a curious frame of mind, of exaggerated fear and hostility and of generosity equally exaggerated, which is however mad in no one’s eyes but our own. (p. 277)

So the people "come to terms" *(transier)*, happy phrase whose double meaning of peace and exchange perfectly epitomizes the primitive contract:

In all the societies that have immediately preceded ours and that still surround us, and even in numerous usages of our own popular morality, there is no middle way: either complete trust or complete mistrust. One lays down one’s arms, renounces magics and gives everything away from casual hospitality to one’s daughters and goods. It is in conditions of this kind that men put aside their self-concern and learnt to engage in giving and returning. But then they had no choice. Two groups of men that meet can only withdraw—or in case of mistrust or defiance, battle—or else come to terms. (p. 277)

By the end of the essay, Mauss had left far behind the mystic forests of Polynesia. The obscure forces of *huau* were forgotten for a different explanation of reciprocity, consequent on the more general theory, and the opposite of all mystery and particularity: *Reason*. The gift is Reason. It is the triumph of human rationality over the folly of war—

It is by opposing reason to emotion, by setting up the will for peace against rash follies of this kind, that peoples succeed in substituting alliance, gift and commerce for war, isolation and stagnation. (p. 278)

I stress not only this "reason," but the "isolation" and "stagnation." Composing society, the gift was the liberation of culture. Oscillating permanently between confrontation and dispersion, the segmentary society is otherwise brutish and static. But the gift is progress. That is its supreme advantage—and Mauss’s final appeal:

Societies have progressed in the measure that they themselves, their subgroups and finally their individuals have been able to stabilize their relations, to give, receive, and to repay. In order to trade it was necessary first to lay down the spear. It is then that one succeeded in exchanging goods and persons, not only between clan and clan, but between tribe and tribe, nation and nation, and, above all, between individuals. It is only consequently that people became capable of mutually creating and
satisfying their interests, and finally of defending them without recourse to arms. It is thus that clans, tribes, peoples have learned—and it is thus that tomorrow in our world called civilized the classes, nations, and also individuals must learn—how to oppose without massacring one another, and how to give without sacrificing one to another. (pp. 278-79)

The “incommodities” of the Hobbesian state of nature had been likewise a lack of progress. And society was similarly condemned to stagnation. Here Hobbes brilliantly anticipated a later ethnology. Without the State (commonwealth) he is saying, lacking special institutions of integration and control, culture must remain primitive and uncomplicated—just as, in the biological realm, the organism had to remain relatively undifferentiated until the appearance of a central nervous system. In some degree, Hobbes even went beyond modern ethnology, which still only in an unconscious way, and without serious attempt to justify its decision, is content to see in the formation of the state the great evolutionary divide between “primitive” and “civilized,” while in the meantime subjecting that famous passage of Hobbes’s where it is explained just why the criterion is good, to nasty, brutish, and short burlesques. Hobbes at least gave a functional justification of the evolutionary distinction, and an indication that qualitative change would alter the quantity:

_The incommodities of such a Warre._ Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth, no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time, no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. (Part 1, Chapter 13)

But to pursue the resemblance to Mauss, from this insecurity and poverty man seeks to escape: for reasons largely of emotion, according to Hobbes, but by means strictly of _reason_. Menaced by material deprivation and haunted by fear of violent death, men would incline to reason, which “suggesteth certain convenient Articles of Peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement.” Thus Hobbes’s well-known Laws of Nature, which are counsels of reason in the interest of preservation, and of which the fit and fundamental is “to seek Peace, and follow it.”

And because the condition of Man, (as hath been declared in the precedent Chapter) is a condition of Warre of every one against everyone; in which case every one is governed by his own Reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; It followeth, that in such a condition, every man has a Right to every thing; even to one another’s body. And therefore, as long as this natural Right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man, how strong or wise soever he be, of living out the time, which Nature ordinarily alloweth men to live. And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of Reason, _That every man, ought to endeavour Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of Warre._ The first branch of which Rule, containeth the first, and Fundamentall Law of Nature; which is, to seek Peace, and follow it. (Part 1, Chapter 14)

That Hobbes had even foreseen the peace of the gift is too strong a claim. But this first law of nature was followed by eighteen others, all effect designed to realize the injunction that men seek peace, and the second through fifth in particular founded on the same principle of reconciliation of which the gift is merely the most tangible expression—found also, that is to say, on reciprocity. So in structure the argument unites with Mauss’s. To this point, at least, Hobbes understands the suppression Warre neither through the victory of one nor by the submission of all, but in a _mutual surrender_. (The ethical importance is obvious, and Mauss would duly emphasize it, but theoretically too the point is in opposition the cult of power and organization that was to mark a later evolutionism and to which Hobbes went on to contribute.)

On the deeper analogy of reciprocity, one may thus juxtapose the exchange Hobbes’s second law of nature, “That a man be willing, when others are so too, as farre forth, as for Peace, and defence of himselfe he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himselfe”; and the third law, “That men performe their Covenants made and again, the fifth, “That every man strive to accomodate himselfe to rest.” But of all these apposite precepts, the fourth law of nature toucheth nearest the gift:
The fourth law of nature, gratitude. As Justice dependeth on Antecedent Covenant; so does GRATITUDE depend on Antecedent Grace that is to say, Antecedent Free-gift: and is the fourth Law of Nature; which may be conceived in this Forme, That a man which receiveth Benefit from another of meer Grace, Endeavour that he which giveth it, have no reason-able cause to repent him of his good will. For no man giveth, but with intention of Good to himselfe; because Gift is Voluntary; and of all Voluntary Acts, the Object is to every man his own Good; of which if men see shall be frustrated, there will be no beginning of benevo-lence, or trust; nor consequently of mutual help; nor of reconciliation of one man to another; and therefore they are to remain still in the condition of War; which is contrary to the first and Fundamentall Law of Nature, which commandeth men to Seek Peace. (Part I, Chapter 15)

Thus the close correspondence between the two philosophers: including, if not exactly the gift, at least a similar appreciation of reciprocity as the primitive mode of peace; and also, if this more marked in Hobbes than in Mauss, a common respect for the rationality of the undertaking. Furthermore, the convergence continues with a negative parallel. Neither Mauss nor Hobbes could trust in the efficacy of reason alone. Both concede, Hobbes more explicitly, that reason against the force of an imprinted rivalry is insufficient to guarantee the contract. Because, says Hobbes, the laws of nature, even if they be reason itself, are contrary to our natural passions, and men cannot be expected unfaithfully to obey unless they are generally coerced to do so. On the other hand, to honor the laws of nature without the assurance that others do likewise is unreasonable; for then the good become prey, and the strong arrogant. Men, says Hobbes, are not bees. Men are driven constantly to compete for honor and dignity, out of which arises hate, envy, and finally, war. And “covenants without the word, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all.”

Hobbes consequently is led to this paradox: that the laws of nature cannot succeed outside the frame of a contrived organization, outside the commonwealth. Natural law is established only by artificial Power, and Reason enfranchised only by Authority.

I stress again the political character of Hobbes’s argument. The commonwealth put an end to the state of nature but not to the nature of man. Men agreed to surrender their right to force (except in self-defense), and to put all their strength at the disposal of a sovereign, who would bear their person and save their lives. In this conception of state formation, Hobbes once more sings very modern. What more fundamental sense has since been made of the state than that it is a differentiation of the generalized primitive order: structurally, the separation of a public authority out of the society at large; functionally, the special reservation to that authority of coercive force (monopoly control of force)?

The only way to erect such a Common Power, as may be able to defend them from the invasion of Forraigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort, as that by their own industry, and by the fruits of the Earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly; is, to conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will: which is as much as to say, to appoint one Man, or Assembly of men, to beare their Person; and every one to owne, and acknowledge himselfe to be the Author of whatsoever that he that so beareth their Person, shall Act, or cause to be Acted, in those things which concern the Common Peace and safety; and therein to submit their Wills, every one to his Will, and their Judgements, to his Judgement. (Part 2, Chapter 17)

But Mauss’s resolution of Warre also had historic merit: it corrected just this simplified progression from chaos to commonwealth, savagery to civili- zation, that had been the work of classical contract theory. Here in the primitive world Mauss displayed a whole array of intermediate forms, not only of a certain stability, but that did not make coercion the price of order. Still, Mauss too was not confident that reason alone had been responsible. Or perhaps it was just an afterthought, upon looking back over the peace of the gift, that he saw in it the signs of an original wisdom. For the ratio-nality of the gift contradicted everything he had said before on the subject of hau. Hobbes’s paradox was to realize the natural (reason) in the artifi-cial; for Mauss, reason took the form of the irrational. Exchange is the triumph of reason, but lacking the embodied spirit of the donor (hau), the gift is not required.

A few last words about the fate of The Gift. Since Mauss, and in part by way of rapprochement with modern economics, anthropology has become more consistently rational in its treatment of exchange. Reciprocity is con- tract pure and mainly secular, sanctioned perhaps by a mixture of considera-tions of which a carefully calculated self-interest is not the least (cf. Firth, 1967). Mauss seems in this regard much more like Marx in the first chapter of Capital: if it can be said without disrespect, more animistic. One quarter of corn is exchangeable for X hundredweight iron. What is it in these things, so obviously different, that yet is equal? Precisely, the question was, for Marx, what in these things brings them into agreement?—and not what
is it about these parties to the exchange? Similarly, for Mauss; “What force is there in the thing given that makes the beneficiary reciprocate?” And the same kind of answer, from “intrinsic” properties: here the bau, if there the socially necessary labor time. Yet “animistic” is manifestly an improper characterization of the thought involved. If Mauss, like Marx, concentrated singularly on the anthropomorphic qualities of the things exchanged, rather than the (thinglike?) qualities of the people, it was because each saw in the transactions respectively at issue a determinate form and epoch of alienation: mystic alienation of the donor in primitive reciprocity, alienation of human social labor in commodity production (cf. Godelier, 1966, p. 143). They thus share the supreme merit, unknown to most “Economic Anthropology,” of taking exchange as it is historically presented, not as a natural category explicable by a certain eternal disposition of humanity.

In the total prestations between clan and clan, said Mauss, things are related in some degree as persons and persons in some degree as things. More than irrational, it exaggerates only slightly to say that the process approaches clinical definitions of neurosis: persons are treated as objects; people confuse themselves with the external world. But even beyond the desire to affirm the rationality of exchange, a large section of Anglo-American anthropology has seemed instinctively repelled by the commercialization of persons apparently implied in the Maussian formula.

Nothing could be farther apart than the initial Anglo-Saxon and French responses to this generalized idea of prestation. Here was Mauss decrying the inhumanity of modern abstract distinctions between real and personal law, calling for a return to the archaic relation between men and things, while the Anglo-Saxons could only congratulate the ancestors for having finally liberated men from a debasing confusion with material objects. And especially for thus liberating women. For when Lévi-Strauss parlayed the "total prestation" into a grand system of marital exchanges, an interesting number of British and American ethnologists recoiled at once from the idea, refusing for their part to "treat women as commodities."

Without wanting to decide the issue, not at least in these terms, I do wonder whether the Anglo-American reaction of distrust was ethnocentric. It seems to presume an external separation of the economic, having to do with getting and spending, and besides always a little off-color, from the social sphere of moral relationships. For if it is decided in advance that the world in general is differentiated as is ours in particular, economic relations being one thing and social (kinship) another, than to speak of groups exchanging women does appear an immoral extension of business to marriage and a slander of all those engaged in the traffic. Still, the conclusion forgets the great lesson of "total prestation," both for the study of primitive economics and of marriage.

The primitive order is generalized. A clear differentiation of spheres into social and economic does not there appear. As for marriage, it is not that commercial operations are applied to social relations, but the two were never completely separated in the first place. We must think here in the same way we do now about classificatory kinship: not that the term for "father" is "extended" to father's brother, phrasing that smuggles in the priority of the nuclear family, but rather that we are in the presence of a broad kinship category that knows no such genealogical distinctions. And as for economics, we are similarly in the presence of a generalized organization for which the supposition that kinship is "exogenous" betrays any hope of understanding.

I mention a final positive contribution of The Gift, related to this point but more specific. At the end of the essay, Mauss in effect recapitulated his thesis by two Melanesian examples of tenuous relations between villages and peoples: of how, menaced always by deterioration into war, primitive groups are nevertheless reconciled by festival and exchange. This theme too was later amplified by Lévi-Strauss. "There is a bond," he wrote, "a continuity, between hostile relations and the provision of reciprocal prestations. Exchanges are peacefully resolved wars and wars are the result of unsuccessful transactions" (1969, p. 67; cf. 1943, p. 136). But this implication of The Gift is, I think, even broader than external relations and transactions. In posing the internal fragility of the segmentary societies, their constituted decomposition, The Gift transposes the classic alternatives of war and trade from the periphery to the very center of social life, and from the occasional episode to the continuous presence. This is the supreme importance of Mauss's return to nature, from which it follows that primitive society is at war with War, and that all their dealings are treaties of peace. All the exchanges, that is to say, must bear in their material design some political burden of reconciliation. Or, as the Bushman said, "The worse thing is not giving presents. If people do not like each other but one gives a gift and the other must accept, this brings a peace between them. We give what we have. That is the way we live together." (Marshall, 1961, p. 245).

And from this comes in turn all the basic principles of an economics properly anthropological, including the one in particular at the heart of [the final two chapters of Stone Age Economics]: that every exchange, as it embodies some coefficient of sociability, cannot be understood in its material terms apart from its social terms.

From Stone Age Economics, 1972.
Notes

1. An English translation of L'Esai sur le don has been prepared by Ian Cunnison, and published as The Gift (London: Cohen and West, 1954).

2. Hereinafter, I will use the Biggs version except where the argument about Mauss's interpretation requires that one cite only the documents available to him. I take this opportunity to thank Professor Biggs for his generous help.

3. It seems from Firth's account that the same procedure was used both against thieves and ingraters. I appeal here to Maori authorities for clarification. From my own very limited and entirely textual experience, it seems that the goods of a victimized party were used particularly in sorcery against thieves. Here, where the culprit usually is not known, some portion of the goods remaining—some of the thing they were kept—is the vehicle for identifying or punishing the thief (for example, Best, 1924, vol. 1, p. 311). But sorcery against a known person is typically practiced by means of something associated with him; thus, in a case of failure to repay, the goods of the deceiver would be more likely to serve as vehicle than the gift of the owner. For further interest and confusion, such a vehicle associated with the victim of witchcraft is known to the Maori as hau. One of the entries under "hau" in W. Williams's dictionary is: "something connected with a person whom it is intended to practice enchantment; such as a portion of his hair, a drop of his spit, or anything which has touched his person, etc., which when taken to the tokongaro [ritual expert] might serve as a connecting link between his incarnations and their object" (Williams, 1892).

4. The intervention of a third party thus offers no obscurity to Firth. The exchange between second and third parties was necessary to introduce a second good that could stand for the first, or for the hau of the first (cf. Firth, 1959, p. 420 n.).

5. "When Mauss sees in the gift exchange an interchange of personalities, 'a bond of souls,' he is following, not native belief, but his own intellectualized interpretation of it" (Firth, 1959, p. 420).

6. In his latest word on the subject, Firth continues to deny the ethnographic validity of Mauss's views on the Maori hau, adding also that a special spiritual belief is involved in Tikopian gift exchange (1967). Too, he now has certain critical reservations on Mauss's discussion of the obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate. Yet at one level he would agree with Mauss. Not in the sense of an actual spiritual entity, but in the more generalized social and psychological sense of an extension of the self, the gift does partake of its donor (ibid., pp. 10—11, 15—16).

7. In the original Maori as published by Best, the passage on gifts was actually intercalated as an expiatory aside between two descriptions of the ceremony. The continuous English translation, however, deletes the main part of the first description, this Best having cited a page earlier (1909, p. 438). Besides, both English and Maori texts begin with a discussion of witchcraft spells, not apparently related to the ceremonial or the gift exchange, but about which more later.

8. There is a very curious difference between the several versions of Best, Mauss, and Tama'i Ranapiri. Mauss appears to deliberately delete Best's reference to the ceremony in the opening phrase. Best had cited "I will now speak of the hau, and the ceremony of whangai hau"; whereas Mauss has it merely, "Je vais vous [sic] parler du hau..." (ellipsis is Mauss's). The interesting point is raised by Bigg's undoubted authentic translation, much closer to that of Mauss, as it like-wise does not mention whangai hau at this point: "Now, concerning the hau of the forest." However, even in this form the original text linked the message on taunga with the ceremony of whangai hau, "fostering" or "nourishing hau," since the hau of the forest was not the subject of the immediately succeeding passage on gifts but of the consequent and ultimate description of the ceremony.

9. I use Best's translation, the one available to Mauss. I also have in hand Bigg's interlinear version; it does not differ significantly from Best's.

10. The earlier discussion of this ritual, preceding the passage on taunga in the full Maori text, in fact comments on two related ceremonies: the one just described and another, performed before, by those sent into the forest in advance of the fowling season to observe the state of the game. I cite the main part of this earlier description in Bigg's version: "The hau of the forest has two 'likenesses.' 1. When the forest is inspected by the observers, and if birds are observed to be there, and if birds are killed by them that day, the first bird killed by them is offered to the mauri. It is simply thrown away into the bush, and is said, 'that's for the mauri.' The reason, lest they get nothing in the future. 2. When the hunting is finished (they) go out of the bush and begin to cook the birds for preserving in fat. Some are set aside first to feed the hau of the forest; this is the forest hau. Those birds which were set aside are cooked on the second fire. Only the priests eat the birds of the second fire. Other birds are set aside for the supairo from which only the women eat. Most of the birds are set aside and cooked on the punuakaukau fire. The birds of the punuakaukau fire are for all to eat..." (cf. Best, 1909, pp. 438, 440—41, 449; and for other details of the ceremonies, 1942, pp. 13, 184f, 316—17).

11. And in Best's translation, even reiterating: "Suppose that you possess a certain article, and you give that article to me, without price. We make no bargain over it."

12. Firth cites the following discussion to this point from Gudgeon: "If a man received a present and passed it on to some third person then there is no impropriety in such an act; but if a return present is made by the third party then it must be passed on to the original grantor or it is a hau ngaro (consumed hau)" (Firth, 1959, p. 418). The lack of consequence in the first of these conditions is again evidence against Mauss's mystical hau, ever striving to return to its foyer.

13. Whitia is the past participle of whitia, Whitia, according to H. Williams's dictionary, means: (1) n.t. cross over, reach the opposite side; (2) change, turn, to be inverted, to be contrary; (3) n.t. pass through; (4) turn over, rise (as with a lever); (5) change (Williams, 1921, p. 584).

14. Best's further interpretation lent itself to Mauss's views: "For it seems that that article of yours is impregnated with a certain amount of your hau, which presumably passes into the article received in exchange therefore, because if I pass that second article on to other hands it is a hau whitia" (1900—01, p. 198). Thus "it seems." One has a feeling of participating in a game of ethnographic folk-etymology, which we now find, from Best's explanation, is a quite probable game à quatre.

15. Thus Mauss's simple translation of hau as spirit and his view of exchange as a lien d'amis is at least imprecise. Beyond that, Best repeatedly would like to distinguish hau (and mauri) from wairua on the grounds that the former, which ceases to exist with death, cannot leave a person's body on pain of death, unlike wairua. But here Best finds himself in difficulty with the material manifestation of a person's hau used in witchcraft, so that he is alternatively tempted to say that some part of the hau can be detached from the body or that the hau as witchcraft is not the "true" hau.

The Spirit of the Gift

17. Why this should seem particularly so in Leviathan in comparison with the earlier Elements of Law and De Cive becomes intelligible from McNelly's recent analysis to the effect that Leviathan completes the transformation of Hobbes's argument into a formal rationality of interpersonal relations (in the absence of a sovereign power), which involves abandonment, as concerns the logic of argument, of the prior stress on the content of human passions. Hence if in the early works, "Hobbes attempts to derive political conclusions from certain (very doubtful) propositions about the specific nature of individual human beings ... in Leviathan the argument depends on an analysis of the formal structure of the relations between individuals" (McNelly, 1968, p. 5).

18. Mauss did note in certain transactions of the present day some "fundamental motives of human activity: emulation between individuals of the same sex, that 'deep-seated imperialism' of men, at base part social, part animal and psychologica..." (1950, pp. 258-59). On the other hand, if as Macpherson (1965) argues, Hobbes's conception of human nature is just the bourgeois eternalized, then Mauss is squarely opposed to it (1950, pp. 72-74).

19. Hobbes's particular inability to conceive primitive society as such is manifest by his assimilation of it, that is of the patriarchal chieftain, to the commonwealth. This is clear enough in the passages of Leviathan on commonwealths by acquisition, but even more definitive in the parallel sections of Elements of Law and De Cive. Thus, in the latter: "A father with his sons and servants, grown into a civil person by virtue of his paternal jurisdiction, is called a family. This family, if through multiplying of children and acquisition of servants it becomes numerous, insomuch as without casting the uncertain die of war it cannot be subdued, will be termed an hereditary kingdom. Which though it differ from an insitative monarchy, being acquired by force, in the original and manner of its constitution; yet being constituted, it hath all the same properties, and the right of authority is everywhere the same; insomuch as it is not needful to speak anything of them apart" (English Works [Molesworth, ed.], 1839, vol. 2, pp. 121-22).

Works Cited


The Time of the King

Jacques Derrida

The King takes all my time; I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give it all.

It is a woman who signs.

It is true that she who is known to have been the influential mistress and even the morganatic wife of the Sun King, Mme. de Maintenon, is writing to Mme. de Maintenon. This woman says in effect, that to the Sun King she gives all, for in giving his time, she gives all or the rest, if one gives all and the rest, if one gives the rest.

This is the condition of those who, like the Sun King, once called themselves King or being called the Sun King. The same condition is true of all forms of the King. The Sun King is a form of the King. As a form of the King, he is more or less the Sun King, more or less the Sun King.

The King takes all my time; I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give it all.
King takes her time, it is because she is glad to give it to him and takes pleasure from it: the King takes nothing from her and gives as much as she takes. And when she says "I give the rest to Saint-Cyr, to whom I would like to give all," she opens herself up to her correspondent about a daily economy concerning the leisures and charities, the works and days of a "grande dame" somewhat overwhelmed by her obligations. None of the words she writes has the sense of the unthinkable and the impossible toward which my reading would have pulled them, in the direction of giving-taking, of time and the rest. She did not mean to say that, you will say.

What if... yes she did [Et si].

And if [Et si] what she wrote meant to say that, then what would that have to suppose? How, where, on the basis of what and when can we read this letter fragment as I have done? How could we even divert it as I have done, while still respecting its literality and its language?

Let us begin by the impossible.

To join together, in a title, time and the gift may seem to be a laborious artifice. What can time have to do with the gift? We mean: what would there be to see in that? What would they have to do with each other, or more literally, to see together, qu'est-ce qu'ils auraient à voir ensemble, one would say in French. Of course, they have nothing to see together and first of all because both of them have a singular relation to the visible. Time, in any case, gives nothing to see. It is at the very least the element of invisibility itself. It withdraws whatever could give itself to be seen. It itself withdraws itself from visibility. One can only be blind to time, to the essential disappearance of time even as, nevertheless, in a certain manner nothing appears that does not require and take time. Nothing sees the light of day, no phenomenon, that is not on the measure of day, in other words, of the revolution that is the rhythm of a sun's course. And that orients this course from its endpoint: from the rising in the east to the setting in the west. The works and days, as we said a moment ago.

We will let ourselves be carried away by this word revolution. At stake is a certain circle whose figure precipitates both time and the gift toward the possibility of their impossibility.

To join together, in a title, once time and the gift may seem to be a laborious artifice, as if, for the sake of economy, one sought to treat two subjects at once. And that is in fact the case, for reasons of economy. But economy is here the subject. What is economy? Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, economy no doubt includes the values of law (nomos) and of home (oikos, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors). Nomos does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (nemein), the law of sharing or partition [partage], the law as partition (moïra), the given or assigned part, participation. Another sort of tautology already implies the economic within the nomic as such. As
soon as there is law, there is partition: as soon as there is nomy, there is economy. Besides the values of law and home, of distribution and partition, economy implies the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return. The figure of the circle is obviously at the center, if that can still be said of a circle. It stands at the center of any problematic of oikonomia, as it does of any economic field: circular exchange, circulation of goods, products, monetary signs or merchandise, amortization of expenditures, revenues, substitution of use values and exchange values. This motif of circulation can lead one to think that the law of economy is the—circular—return to the point of departure, to the origin, also to the home. So one would have to follow the odyssean structure of the economic narrative. Oikonomia would always follow the path of Ulysses. The latter returns to the side of his loved ones or to himself, he goes away in view of repatriating himself, in order to return to the home from which [à partir d'ici] the signal for departure is given and the part assigned, the side chosen [le parti pris], the lot divided, destiny commanded (moira). The being-next-to-self of the Idea in Absolute Knowledge would be odyssean in this sense, that of an economy and a nostalgia, a “homesickness,” a provisional exile longing for reappropriation.

Now the gift, if there is any, would no doubt be related to economy. One cannot treat the gift, this goes without saying, without treating this relation to economy, even to the money economy. But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy? That which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer gives rise to exchange? That which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry, the common measure, and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return? If there is gift, the given of the gift (that which one gives, that which is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation) must not come back to the giving (let us not already say to the subject, to the donor). It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure. If the figure of the circle is essential to economics, the gift must remain an economic. Not that it remains foreign to the circle, but it must keep a relation of foreignness to the circle, a relation without relation of familiar foreignness. It is perhaps in this sense that the gift is the impossible.

Not impossible but the impossible. The very figure of the impossible. It announces itself, gives itself to be thought as the impossible. It is proposed that we begin by this.

And we will do so. We will begin later. By the impossible.

The motif of the circle will obsess us throughout this cycle of lectures. Let us provisionally set aside the question of whether we are talking about a geometric figure, a metaphorical representation, or a great symbol, symbol of the symbolic itself. We have learned from Hegel to treat this problem. Saying that the circle will obsess us is another manner of saying that it will encircle us. It will besiege us all the while that we will be regularly attempting to exit [la sortie]. But why exactly would one desire, alo with the gift, if there is any, the exit? Why desire the gift and why desire interrupt the circulation of the circle? Why wish to get out of it [en sortir]? Why wish to get through it [s'en sortir]?

The circle has already put us onto the trail of time and of that which, way of the circle, circulates between the gift and time. One of the powerful and ineluctable representations, at least in the history of me physics, is the representation of time as a circle. Time would always be a process or a movement in the form of the circle or the sphere. Of this privilege of circular movement in the representation of time, let us take one index for the moment. It is a note by Heidegger, the last and longest one in Sein und Zeit. Some time ago I attempted a reading of it “Ousia and Grammé: Note on a Note from Being and Time.”² Since this Note and this Note on a note will be part of our premises, it will help recall at least the part concerning the absolute insinuance of this figure the circle in the metaphysical interpretation of time. Heidegger writes:

The priority which Hegel has given to the “now” which has been leveled off, makes it plain that in defining the concept of time he is under the sway of the manner in which time is ordinarily understood; and this means that he is likewise under the sway of the traditional conception of it. It can even be shown that his conception of time has been drawn directly from the “physics” of Aristotle. [ . . . ] Aristotle sees the essence of time in the nun, Hegel in the “now” [jetzt]. Aristotle takes the nun as oros; Hegel takes the “now” as “boundary” [Grenze]. Aristotle understands the nun as stigmé; Hegel interprets the “now” as a point. Aristotle describes the nun as tode ti; Hegel calls the “now” the “absolute this” [das “absolute Dieses”]. Aristotle follows tradition in connecting khrónos with sphaira, Hegel stresses the “circular course” [Kreislauf] of time.

[ . . . ] In suggesting a direct connection between Hegel’s conception of time and Aristotel’s analysis, we are not accusing Hegel of any “dependence” on Aristotle, but are calling attention to the ontological import which this filiation has in principle for the Hegelian logic.⁶

There would be more to say on the figure of the circle in Heidegger. treatment is not simple. It also implies a certain affirmation of the circle which is assumed. One should not necessarily flee or condemn circularity,
one would a bad repetition, a vicious circle, a regressive or sterile process. One must, in a certain way of course, inhabit the circle, turn around in it, live there a feast of thinking, and the gift, the gift of thinking, would be no stranger there. That is what Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks (The Origin of the Work of Art) suggests. But this motif, which is not a stranger to the motif of the hermeneutic circle either, coexists with what we might call a delimitation of the circle: the latter is but a particular figure, the “particular case” of a structure of nodal coiling up or interlacing that Heidegger names the Gescheit in Unterwegs zur Sprache (On the Way to Language).

If one were to stop here with this first somewhat simplifying representation or with these hastily formulated premises, what could one already say? That wherever there is time, wherever time predominates or conditions experience in general, wherever time as circle (a vulgar concept, Heidegger would therefore say) is predominant, the gift is impossible. A gift could be possible, there could be a gift only at the instant an effraction in the circle will have taken place, at the instant all circulation will have been interrupted and on the condition of this instant. What is more, this instant of effraction (of the temporal circle) must no longer be part of time. That is why we said “on the condition of this instant.” This condition concerns time but does not belong to it, does not pertain to it without being, for all that, more logical than chronological. There would be a gift only at the instant when the paradoxical instant (in the sense in which Kierkegaard says of the paradoxical instant of decision that it is madness) tears time apart. In this sense one would never have the time of a gift. In any case, time, the “present” of the gift, is no longer thinkable as a now, that is, as a present bound up in the temporal synthesis.

The relation of the gift to the “present,” in all the senses of this term, also to the presence of the present, will form one of the essential knots in the interface of this discourse, in its Gescheit, in the knot of that Gescheit of which Heidegger says precisely that the circle is perhaps only one figure or a particular case, an inscribed possibility. That a gift is called a present, that “to give” may also be said “to make a present,” “to give a present” (in French as well as in English, for example), this will not be for us just a verbal clue, a linguistic chance or aléa.

We said a moment ago: “Let us begin by the impossible.” By the impossible, what ought one to have understood?

If we are going to speak of it, we will have to name something. Not to present the thing, here the impossible, but to try with its name, or with some name, to give an understanding of or to think this impossible thing, this impossible itself. To say we are going to “name” is perhaps already or still to say too much. For it is perhaps the name of name that is going to find itself put in question. If, for example, the gift were impossible, the name or noun “gift,” what the linguist or the grammarian believes he recognizes to be a name, would not be a name. At least, it would not name what one thinks it names, to wit, the unity of a meaning that would be that of the gift. Unless the gift were the impossible but not the unnameable or the unthinkable, and unless in this gap between the impossible and the thinkable a dimension opens up where there is gift—and even where there is period, for example time, where is given being and time (es gibt das Sein or es gibt die Zeit, to say it in a way that anticipates excessively what would be precisely a certain essential excess of the gift, indeed an excess of the gift over the essence itself).

Why and how can I think that the gift is the impossible? And why is it here a matter precisely of thinking, as if thinking, the word thinking, found its fit only in this disproportion of the impossible, even announcing itself—as thought irreducible to intuition, irreducible also to perception, judgment, experience, science, faith—only on the basis of this figure of the impossible, on the basis of the impossible in the figure of the gift?

Let us suppose that someone wants or desires to give to someone. In our logic and our language we say it thus: someone wants or desires, someone intends to give something to someone. Already the complexity of the formula appears formidable. It supposes a subject and a verb, a constituted subject, which can also be collective—for example, a group, a community, a nation, a clan, a tribe—in any case, a subject identical to itself and conscious of its identity, indeed seeking through the gesture of the gift to constitute its own unity and, precisely, to get its own identity recognized so that that identity comes back to it, so that it can appropriate its identity: as its property.

Let us suppose, then, an intention-to-give: Some “one” wants or desires to give. Our common language or logic will cause us to hear the interlace of this already complex formula as incomplete. We would tend to complete it by saying “some one” (A) intends to give B to C, some “one” intends to give or gives “something” to “someone other.” This “something” may not be a thing in the common sense of the word but rather a symbolic object; and like the donor, the donee may be a collective subject; but in any case A gives B to C. These three elements, identical to themselves or on the way to an identification with themselves, look like what is presupposed by every gift event. For the gift to be possible, for there to be gift event, according to our common language and logic, it seems that this compound structure is indispensable. Notice that in order to say this, I must already suppose a certain precomprehension of what gift means. I suppose that I know and that you know what “to give,” “gift,” “donor,” “donee” mean.
in our common language. As well as “to want,” “to desire,” “to intend.” This is an unsigned but effective contract between us, indispensable to what is happening here, namely, that you accord, lend, or give some attention and some meaning to what I myself am doing by giving, for example, a lecture. This whole presupposition will remain indispensable at least for the credit that we accord each other, the faith or faith that we lend each other, even if in a little while we were to argue and disagree about everything. It is by making this precomprehension (credit or faith) explicit that one can authorize oneself to state the following axiom: In order for there to be gift, gift event, some “one” has to give some “thing” to someone other, without which “giving” would be meaningless. In other words, if giving indeed means what, in speaking of it among ourselves, we think it means, then it is necessary, in a certain situation, that some “one” give some “thing” to some “one other,” and so forth. This appears tautological, it goes without saying, and seems to imply the defined term in the definition, which is to say it defines nothing at all. Unless the discreet introduction of “one” and of “thing” and especially of “other” (“someone other”) does not portend some disturbance in the tautology of a gift that cannot be satisfied with giving or with giving (to) itself [se donner] without giving something (other) to someone (other).

For this is the impossible that seems to give itself to be thought here: these conditions of possibility of the gift (that some “one” gives some “thing” to some “one other”) designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of the gift. And already we could translate this in other terms: these conditions of possibility define or produce the annulment, the annihilation, the destruction of the gift.

Once again, let us set out in fact from what is the simplest level and let us still entrust ourselves to this semantic precomprehension of the word “gift” in our language or in a few familiar languages. For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counterfeit, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or difference. This is all too obvious if the other, the donee, gives me back immediately the same thing. It may, moreover, be a matter of a good thing or a bad thing. Here we are anticipating another dimension of the problem, namely, that if giving is spontaneously evaluated as good (it is well and good to give and what one gives, the present, the cadeau, the gift, is a good), it remains the case that this “good” can easily be reversed. We know that as good, it can also be bad, poisonous (Gift, gift), and this from the moment the gift puts the other in debt, with the result that giving comes down to hurting, to doing harm; here one need hardly mention the fact that in certain languages, for example in French, one may say as readily “to give a gift” as “to give a blow” [donner un coup], “to give life” [donner la vie] as “to give death” [donner la mort], thereby either dissociating and opposing them or identifying them. So we were saying that, quite obviously, if the donee gives back the same thing, for example an invitation to lunch (and the example of food or of what are called consumer goods will never be just one example among others), the gift is annulled. It is annulled each time there is restitution or counterfeit. Each time, according to the same circular ring that leads to “giving back” [“rendre”], there is payment and discharge of a debt. In this logic of the debt, the circulation of a good or of goods is not only the circulation of the “things” that we will have offered to each other, but even of the values or the symbols that are involved there [qui s’y engage] and the intentions to give, whether they are conscious or unconscious. Even though all the anthropologies, indeed the metaphysics of the gift have, quite rightly and justifiably, treated together, as a system, the gift and the debt, the gift and the cycle of restitution, the gift and the loan, the gift and credit, the gift and the counterfeit, we are here departing, in a peremptory and distinct fashion, from this tradition. That is to say, from tradition itself. We will take our point of departure in the dissociation, in the overwhelming evidence of this other axiom: There is gift, if there is any, only in what interrupts the system as well as the symbol, in a partition without return and without division [répartition], without being-with-self of the gift-counter-gift.

For there to be a gift, it is necessary [il faut] that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquire himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt. (This “it is necessary” is already the mark of a duty, of a debt owed, of the duty-not-to [le devoir de ne pas]. The donee owes it to himself even not to give back; he ought not owe [il a un devoir de ne pas devoir], and the donor ought not count on restitution. It is thus necessary, at the limit, that he not recognize the gift as gift. If he recognizes it as 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. Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent. Here one cannot even say that the symbolic re-constitutes the exchange and annuls the gift in the debt. It does not re-constitute an exchange, which, because it no longer takes place as exchange of things or goods, would be transfigured into a symbolic exchange. The symbolic opens and constitutes the order of exchange and of debt, the law or the order of circulation in which the gift gets annulled. It suffices therefore for the other to perceive the gift—not only to perceive it in the sense in which,
as one says in French, "on perçoit," one receives, for example, merchandise, payment, or compensation—but to perceive its nature of gift, the meaning or intention, the intentional meaning of the gift, in order for this simple recognition of the gift as gift, as such, to annul the gift as gift even before recognition becomes gratitude. The simple identification of the gift seems to destroy it. The simple identification of the passage of a gift as such, that is, of an identifiable thing among some identifiable "ones," would be nothing other than the process of the destruction of the gift. It is as if, between the event or the institution of the gift as such and its destruction, the difference were destined to be constantly annulled. At the limit, the gift as gift ought not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift. Neither to the "one" nor to the "other." If the other perceives or receives it, if he or she keeps it as gift, the gift is annulled. But the one who gives it must not see it or know it either; otherwise he begins, at the threshold, as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or of what he is preparing to give. The temporality of the event (memory, present, anticipation, retention, projection, imminence of the future; "ecstasies," and so forth) always sets in motion the process of a destruction of the gift: through keeping, restitution, reproduction, the anticipatory expectation or apprehension that grasps or comprehends in advance.

In all these cases, the gift can certainly keep its phenomenality or, if one prefers, its appearance as gift. But its very appearance, the simple phenom- enon of the gift annuls it as gift, transforming the apparition into a phantom and the operation into a simulacrum. It suffices that the other perceives and keeps, not even the object of the gift, the object given, the thing, but the meaning or the quality, the gift property of the gift, its intentional meaning, for the gift to be annihilated. We expressly say: It suffices that the gift keep its phenomenality. But keeping begins by taking. As soon as the other accepts, as soon as he or she takes, there is no more gift. For this destruction to occur, it suffices that the movement of acceptance (of prehension, of reception) last a little, however little that may be, more than an instant, an instant already caught up in the temporalizing synthesis, in the syn or the sum or the being-with-self of time. There is no more gift as soon as the other receives—and even if she refuses the gift that she has perceived or recognized as gift. As soon as she keeps for the gift the signification of gift, she loses it, there is no more gift. Consequently, if there is no gift, there is no gift, but if there is gift held or beheld as gift by the other, once again there is no gift; in any case the gift does not exist and does not present itself. If it presents itself, it no longer presents itself.

We can imagine a first objection. It concerns the at least implicit recourse that we have just had to the values of subject, self, consciousness, even intentional meaning and phenomenon, a little as if we were limiting ourselves to a phenomenology of the gift even as we declared the gift to be irreducible to its phenomenon or to its meaning and said precisely that it was destroyed by its own meaning and its own phenomenality. The objection would concern the way in which we are describing the intentionality of intention, reception, perception, keeping, recognition—in sum, every- thing by means of which one or the other, donee and donor, take part in the symbolic and thus annul the gift in the debt. One could object that this description is still given in terms of the self, of the subject that says I, ego, of intentional or intuitive perception-consciousness, or even of the conscious or unconscious ego (for Freud the ego or a part of the ego can be unconscious). One may be tempted to oppose this description to another that would substitute for the economy of perception-consciousness an economy of the unconscious. Across the forgetting, the non-keeping, and the non-consciousness called up by the gift, the debt and the symbolic would reconstitute themselves for the subject of the Unconscious or the unconscious subject. As donee or donor, the Other would keep, bind him- self, obligate himself, indebt himself according to the law and the order of the symbolic, according to the figure of circulation, even as the conditions of the gift—forgetfulness, non-appearance, non-phenomenality, non-perception, non-keeping—would have been fulfilled. We are indicating here only the principle of a problematic displacement that we would have to go into more carefully.

The necessity of such a displacement is of the greatest interest. It offers us new resources of analysis, it alerts us to the traps of the would-be gift without debt, it activates our critical or ethical vigilance. It permits us always to say: "Careful, you think there is gift, dissymmetry, generosity, expenditure, or loss, but the circle of the debt, of exchange, or of symbolic equilibrium reconstitutes itself according to the laws of the unconscious; the 'generous' or 'grateful' consciousness is only the phenomenon of a calculation and the ruse of an economy. Calculation and ruse, economy in truth would be the truth of these phenomena."

But such a displacement does not affect the paradox with which we are struggling, namely, the impossibility or the double bind of the gift: For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift. For if we added "not even taken or kept," it was precisely so that the generality of these notions (of taking and especially of keeping) could cover a wider reception, sense, and acceptance than that of consciousness or of the perception-consciousness system. We had in mind also the keeping in the Unconscious, memory, the putting into
reserve or temporalization as effect of repression. For there to be gift, not only must the donor or donee not perceive or receive the gift as such, have no consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition; he or she must also forget it right away [à l'instant] and moreover this forgetting must be so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic categoriality of forgetting. This forgetting of the gift must even no longer be forgetting in the sense of repression. It must not give rise to any of the repressions (originally secondary) that reconstitute the debt and exchange by putting in reserve, by keeping or saving up what is forgotten, repressed, or censured. Repression does not destroy or annul anything; it keeps by displacing. Its operation is systemic or topological; it always consists of keeping by exchanging places. And, by keeping the meaning of the gift, repression annuls it in symbolic recognition. However unconscious this recognition may be, it is effective and can be verified in no better fashion than by its effects or by the symptoms it yields up [quelle donne] for decoding.

So we are speaking here of an absolute forgetting—a forgetting that also absolves, that unbinds absolutely and infinitely more, therefore, than excuse, forgiveness, or acquittal. As condition of a gift event, condition for the advent of a gift, absolute forgetting should no longer have any relation with either the psycho-philosophical category of forgetting or even with the psychoanalytic category that links forgetting to meaning/or to the logic of the signifier, to the economy of repression, and to the symbolic order. The thought of this radical forgetting as thought of the gift should accord with a certain experience of the trace as cinder or ashes in the sense in which we have tried to approach it elsewhere.

And yet we say “forgetting” and not nothing. Even though it must leave nothing behind it, even though it must efface everything, including the traces of repression, this forgetting, this forgetting of the gift cannot be a simple non-experience, a simple non-appearance, a self-effacement that is carried off with what it effaces. For there to be gift event (we say event and not act), something must come about or happen, in an instant, in an instant that no doubt does not belong to the economy of time, in a time without time, in such a way that the forgetting forgets, that it forgets itself, but also in such a way that this forgetting, without being something present, presentable, determinable, sensible, or meaningful, is not nothing. What this forgetting and this forgetting of forgetting would therefore give us to think is something other than a philosophical, psychological, or psychoanalytic category. Far from giving us to think the possibility of the gift, on the contrary, it is on the basis of what takes shape in the name gift that one could hope thus to think forgetting. For there to be forgetting in this sense, there must be gift. The gift would also be the condition of forgetting. By condition, let us not understand merely “condition of possibility,” a system of premises or even of causes, but a set of traits defining a given situation in which something, or that [“es”], is established (as in the expressions “the human condition,” “the social condition,” and so forth). We are not talking therefore about conditions in the sense of conditions posed (since forgetting and gift, if there is any, are in this sense unconditional), but in the sense in which forgetting would be in the condition of the gift and the gift in the condition of forgetting; one might say on the mode of being of forgetting, if “mode” and “mode of being” did not belong to an ontological grammar that is exceeded by what we are trying to talk about here, that is, gift and forgetting. But such is the condition of all the words that we will be using here, of all the words given in our language—and this linguistic problem, let us say rather this problem of language before linguistics, will naturally be our obsession here.

Forgetting and gift would therefore be each in the condition of the other. This already puts us on the path to be followed. Not a particular path leading here or there, but on the path, on the Weg or Bewegen (path, to move along a path, to cut a path), which, leading nowhere, marks the step that Heidegger does not distinguish from thought. The thought on whose path we are, the thought as path or as movement along a path is precisely what is related to that forgetting that Heidegger does not name as a psychological or psychoanalytic category but as the condition of Being and of the truth of Being. This truth of Being or of the meaning of Being was foreshadowed, for Heidegger, on the basis of a question of Being posed, beginning with the first part of Sein und Zeit, in the transcendental horizon of the question of time. The explicitation of time thus forms the horizon of the question of Being as question of presence. The first line of Sein und Zeit says of this question that it “hast today fallen into oblivion [in Vergessenheit]. Even though in our time [unsere Zeit] we deem it progressive to give our approval to ‘metaphysics’ again. . . .”

Here we must be content with the most preliminary and minimal selection within the Heideggerian trajectory; we will limit ourselves to situating that which links the question of time to the question of the gift, and then both of them to a singular thinking of forgetting. In fact, forgetting plays an essential role that aligns it with the very movement of history and of the truth of Being (Sein) which is nothing since it is not, since it is not being (Seiendes), that is, being-present or present-being. Metaphysics would have interpreted Being (Sein) as being-present/present-being only on the basis of, precisely, a pre-interpretation of time, which pre-interpretation grants an absolute privilege to the now-present, to the temporal ecstatic named present. That is why the transcendental question of time (and within it a
new existential analysis of the temporality of *Dasein* was the privileged horizon for a reelaboration of the question of Being. Now, as we know, this movement that consisted in interrogating the question of Being within the transcendental horizon of time was not interrupted (even though *Sein und Zeit* was halted after the first half and even though Heidegger attributed this interruption to certain difficulties linked to the language and the grammar of metaphysics), but rather led off toward another turn or turning (*Kehre*). After this turning, it will not be a matter of subordinating the question of Being to the question of the *Ereignis*, a difficult word to translate (event or propriation that is inseparable from a movement of dis-pro- priation, *Enteignen*). This word *Ereignis*, which commonly signifies event, signals toward a thinking of appropriation or of de-propriation that cannot be unrelated to that of the gift. So from now on it will not be a matter of subordinating, through a purely logical inversion, the question of Being to that of *Ereignis*, but of conditioning them otherwise one by the other, one with the other. Heidegger sometimes says that Being (das *Sein*, an archaic spelling that attempts to recall the word to a more thinking—denkerisch—mode) is *Ereignis*. And it is in the course of this movement that Being (Sein)—which is not, which does not exist as being-present/present-being—is signaled on the basis of the gift.

This is played out around the German expression *es gibt*, which, moreover, in *Sein und Zeit* (1928) had made a first, discreet appearance that was already obeying the same necessity. We translate the idiomatic locution *es gibt* by “il y a l’être” in French and in English “there is Being” (Being is not but there is Being), “il y a le temps,” “there is time” (time is not but there is time). Heidegger tries to get us to hear in this [nous donner à y entendre] “the it gives,” or as one might say in French, in a neutral but not negative fashion, “ça donne,” an “it gives” that would not form an utterance in the propositional structure of Greco-Latin grammar, that is, bearing on present-being/being-present and in the subject-predicate relation (S/P). The enigma is concentrated both in the “it” or rather the “es,” the “ça” of “ça donne,” which is not a thing, and in this giving that gives but without giving anything and without anyone giving anything—nothing but Being and time (which are nothing). In *Zeit und Sein* (1952), Heidegger’s attention bears down on the giving (Gebe) or the gift (Gabe) implicated by the *es gibt*. From the beginning of the meditation, Heidegger recalls, if one can put it this way, that in itself time is nothing temporal, since it is nothing, since it is not a thing (*kein Ding*). The temporality of time is not temporal, no more than proximity is proximate or treeness is woody. He also recalls that Being is not being (being-present/present-being), since it is not something (*kein Ding*), and that there-
think Being and time in their “own element” ([in sein Eigenes, in ihr Eigenes]), the desire to accede to the proper is already, we could say, surreptitiously ordered by Heidegger according to the dimension of “giving.” And reciprocally. What would it mean to think the gift, Being, and time properly in that which is most proper to them or in that which is properly their own, that is, what they can give and give over to the movements of propriation, expropriation, de-propriation, or appropriation? Can one ask these questions without anticipating a thought, even a desire of the proper? A desire to accede to the property of the proper? Is this a circle? Is there any other definition of desire? In that case, how to enter into such a circle or how to get out of it? Are the entrance and the exit the only two modalities of our inscription in the circle? Is this circle itself inscribed in the interlacings of a Geflecht of which it forms but one figure? These are so many threads to be pursued.

The only thread that we will retain here, for the moment, is that of play. Whether it is a matter of Being, of time, or of their deployment in presence (Anwesen), the es gibt plays (spielte), says Heidegger, in the movement of the Entbehren, in that which frees from the withdrawal (retrait), the withdrawal of the withdrawal, when what is hidden shows itself or what is sheltered appears. The play (Zuspiel) also marks, works on, manifests the unity of the three dimensions of time, which is to say a fourth dimension: The “giving” of the es gibt Zeit belongs to the play of this “quadridimensionality,” to this properness of time that would thus be quadridimensional. “True time [authentic time: die eigentliche Zeit],” says Heidegger, “is four-dimensional [vier-dimensional].” This fourth dimension, as Heidegger makes clear, is not a figure, it is not a manner of speaking or of counting; it is said of the thing itself, on the basis of the thing itself (aus der Sache) and not only “so to speak.” This thing itself of time implies the play of the four and the play of the gift.

Faced with this play of fours, of the four, as play of the gift, one thinks of the hand dealt by this game ([la donne de ce jeu]), of the locution “ça donne” (it gives), of the French imperative “donne” that, given by grammar to be an imperative, perhaps says something other than an order, a desire, or a demand. And then one thinks of la dona, of the woman who has been soliciting us since the epigraph, of all the questions of language that are crossing, in German and in French, in the locutions es gibt and ça donne. Thinking of all that and the rest, we will also evoke a very fine book by Lucette Finas which interlaces all these motifs: the alea, the play of the four (quatre) and of cards (cartes), the verb give, the locution ça donne (for example, when it is said in French of a purulent body). All these motifs and a few others find themselves woven into a narration, into a narration of narration or into a passion of narration. We will have to recognize that the question of récit (narration) and of literature is at the heart of all those we are talking about now. Lucette Finas’s novel knots all these threads into the absolute idiom, the effect of the absolute idiom, which is a proper name (Donne is a proper name in the novel), a proper name without which perhaps there would never be either a narration effect or a gift effect. Even though we do not meet Heidegger in person in this novel, it is hard to resist the impression that he is hiding behind a series of men’s proper names whose initial, with its German assonance, is H.

This detour was meant first of all to remind us that the forgetting we are talking about, if it is constitutive of the gift, is no longer a category of the psyche. It cannot be unrelated to the forgetting of Being, in the sense in which Blanchot also says, more or less, that forgetting is another name of Being.

As the condition for a gift to be given, this forgetting must be radical not only on the part of the donee but first of all, if one can say here first of all, on the part of the donor. It is also on the part of the donor “subject” that the gift not only must not be repayed but must not be kept in memory, retained as symbol of a sacrifice, as symbolic in general. For the symbol immediately engages one in restitution. To tell the truth, the gift must not even appear or signify, consciously or unconsciously, as gift for the donors, whether individual or collective subjects. From the moment the gift would appear as gift, as such, as what it is, in its phenomenon, its sense, and its essence, it would be engaged in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of the debt. The simple intention to give, insofar as it carries the intentional meaning of the gift, suffices to make a return payment to oneself. The simple consciousness of the gift right away sends itself back the gratifying image of goodness or generosity, of the giving-being who, knowing itself to be such, recognizes itself in a circular, specular fashion, in a sort of auto-recognition, self-approval, and narcissistic gratitude.

And this is produced as soon as there is a subject, as soon as donor and donee are constituted as identical, identifiable subjects, capable of identifying themselves by keeping and naming themselves. It is even a matter, in this circle, of the movement of subjectivization, of the constitutive retention of the subject that identifies itself with itself. The becoming-subject then reckons with itself, it enters into the realm of the calculable as subject. That is why, if there is gift, it cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects, things, or symbols. The question of the gift should therefore seek its place before any relation to the subject, before any conscious or unconscious relation to self of the subject—and that is indeed what happens with
Heidgger when he goes back before the determinations of Being as substantial being, subject, or object. One would even be tempted to say that a subject as such never gives or receives a gift. It is constituted, on the contrary, in view of dominating, through calculation and exchange, the mastery of this hubris or of this impossibility that is announced in the promise of the gift. Where there is subject and object, the gift would be excluded. A subject will never give an object to another subject. But the subject and the object are arrested effects of the gift, arrests of the gift. At the zero or infinite speed of the circle.

If the gift is annulled in the economic odyssey of the circle as soon as it appears as gift or as soon as it signifies itself as gift, there is no longer any “logic of the gift,” and one may safely say that a consistent discourse on the gift becomes impossible: It misses its object and always speaks, finally, of something else. One could go so far as to say that a work as monumental as Marcel Mauss’s The Gift speaks of everything but the gift: It deals with economy, exchange, contract (do et dei), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift and countergift—in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift and the annulment of the gift. All the gift supplements (potlatch, transgressions and excesses, surplus values, the necessity to give or give back more, returns with interest—in short, the whole sacrificial bidding war) are destined to bring about once again the circle in which they are annulled. Moreover, this figure of the circle is evoked literally by Mauss (literally in French since I am for the moment setting aside an essential problem of translation to which we will return). On the subject of the Kula, a kind of “grand potlatch” practiced in the Trobriand Islands and the vehicle for busy intertribal trade [extending] over the whole of the Trobriand Islands,” Mauss writes:

Malinowski gives no translation of kula, which doubtless means “circle.” Indeed it is as if all these tribes, these expeditions across the sea, these precious things and objects for use, these types of food and festivals, these services rendered of all kinds, ritual and sexual, these men and women,—were caught up in a circle following around this circle a regular movement in time and space.

*Note: Malinowski favors the expression “kula ring.” (Pp. 21–22; emphasis added).

Let us take this first reference to Mauss as a pretext for indicating right away the two types of questions that will orient our reading.

1. The question of language or rather of languages. How is one to legitimate the translations thanks to which Mauss circulates and travels, identifying from one culture to another what he understands by gift, what he calls gift? He does this essentially on the basis of the Latin language and of Roman law. The latter plays a singular role throughout the essay, but Mauss also takes German law into account, which is the occasion for him to remark that the “detailed study of the very rich German vocabulary of words derived from geben and geben has not yet been made” (p. 60). This question of the idiom, as we shall see, is in itself a question of gift in a rather unusual sense that amounts to neither the gift of languages nor the gift of language.

2. The second type of question cannot be separated from the first, in its widest generality. It would amount to asking oneself in effect: What and whom is Mauss talking about in the end? What is the semantic horizon of anticipation that authorizes him to gather together or compare so many phenomena of diverse sorts, which belong to different cultures, which manifest themselves in heterogeneous languages, under the unique and supposedly identifiable category of gift, under the sign of “gift”? What remains problematic is not only the unity of this semantic horizon, that is, the presumed identity of a meaning that operates as general translator or equivalent, but the very existence of something like the gift, that is, the common referent of this sign that is itself uncertain. If what Mauss demonstrates, one way or the other, is indeed that every gift is caught in the round or the contract of usury, then not only the unity of the meaning “gift” remains doubtful but, on the hypothesis that giving would have a meaning and one meaning, it is still the possibility of an effective existence, of an effectuation or an event of the gift that seems excluded. Now, this problematic of the difference (in the sense that we evoked earlier) between “the gift exists” and “there is gift” is never, as we know, deployed or even approached by Mauss, no more than it seems to be, to my knowledge, by the anthropologists who come after him or refer to him. Questions of this type should be articulated with other questions that concern the metalinguistic or meta-ethnological conceptuality orienting this discourse, the category of totality (“total social fact”), the political, economic, and juridical ideology organizing the classification and the evaluation, for example, the one that permits Mauss, at the end (it is especially at the end that these evaluations are openly declared), to say that “segmented” societies—Indo-European societies, Roman society before the Twelve Tables, Germanic societies up to the writing of the Edda, Irish society up to the writing of its “chief literature”—were ones in which individuals were “less sad, less serious, less miserly, and less personal than we are. Externally at least, they were or are more generous, and more giving than we are” (p. 81).

Everything thus seems to lead us back toward the paradox or the aporia of a nuclear proposition in the form of the “if . . . then”: If the gift appears or signifies itself, if it exists or if it is presently as gift, as what it is, then it is
not, it annuls itself. Let us go to the limit: The truth of the gift (its being or its appearing such, its as such insofar as it guides the intentional signification or the meaning-to-say) suffices to annul the gift. The truth of the gift is equivalent to the non-gift or to the non-truth of the gift. This proposition obviously defies common sense. That is why it is caught in the impossibility of a very singular double bind, the bond without bond of a bind and a non-bind. On the one hand, Mauss reminds us that there is no gift without bond, without bind, without obligation or ligature; but on the other hand, there is no gift that does not have to untie itself from obligation, from debt, contract, exchange, and thus from the bind.

But, after all, what would be a gift that fulfills the condition of the gift, namely, that it not appear as gift, that it not be, exist, signify, want-to-say as gift? A gift without wanting, without wanting-to-say, an insignificant gift, a gift without intention to give? Why would we still call that a gift? That, which is to say what?

In other words, what are we thinking when we require simultaneously of the gift that it appear and that it not appear in its essence, in what it has to be, in what it is to be, in what it will have to be (in its to ti en cinai or in its quiddias)? That it obligate and not obligate? That it be and not be that for which it is given? What does “to give” mean to say? And what does language give one to think with this word? And what does “to give” mean to say in the case of language, of thinking, and of meaning-to-say?

It so happens (but this “it so happens” does not name the fortuitous) that the structure of this impossible gift is also that of Being—that gives itself to be thought on the condition of being nothing (no present-being, no being-present)—and of time which, even in what is called its “vulgar” determination, from Aristotle to Heidegger, is always defined in the paradox or rather the aporia of what is without being, of what is never present or what is only scarcely and dimly. Once again let us refer to all the texts, notably those of Aristotle, that are cited in “Onsia and Grammê,” beginning with the Fourth Book of the Physics, which says, in the exoteric phase of its discourse, διά τον εξοςείκον λόγον, that time “is not at all or only scarcely and dimly is [οἶδα οὐκ εστίν εἰ μολίς καὶ αμφότεροι].” Such is the aporetic effect—the “what does not pass” or “what does not happen”—of time defined on the basis of the now, of the now, as persas, limit, and as stigmê, the point of the instant. "Some of it has been and is not [γαγόμενοι καὶ οὐκ εστίν], some of it is to be and is not yet [μελέτοι καὶ οὐ περαὶ εστίν]." From these both infinite time [αἰπτρόω] and time in its incessant return [αἰσ λαμβανομένας] are composed. But it would seem to be impossible that what is composed of things that are not should participate in being [οὐσία].”

We will not analyze here the context and the situation of this proposition called exoteric. Let us take it simply as a marker in the history of an aporetics that will become law and tradition: From the moment time is apprehended on the basis of the present now as general form and only modifiable or modifiable in such a way that the past and the future are still present-past and presents-to-come, this predetermination entails the aporetics of a time that is not, of a time that is wishless being (is) [sans l'être], that is not what it is and that is what it is not, which is to be without being (is) [qui est de l'être sans l'être].

If it shares this aporetic paralysis with the gift, if neither the gift not time exist as such, then the gift that there can be [qu'il peut y avoir] cannot in any case give time, since it is nothing. If there is something that can in no case be given, it is time, since it is nothing and since in any case it does not properly belong to anyone; if certain persons or certain social classes have more time than others—and this is finally the most serious stake of political economy—it is certainly not time itself that they possess. But inversely, if giving implies in all rigor that one give nothing that is and that appears as such—determined thing, object, symbol—if the gift is the giving itself and nothing else, then how to give time? This idiomatic location, “to give time,” seems to mean in common usage “leave time for something, leave time to do something, to fill time with this or that.” As usual, it intends less time itself and properly speaking than the temporal or what there is in time. “To give time” in this sense commonly means to give something other than time but something other that is measured by time as by its element. Beyond this historical hardening or sedimentation, perhaps the idiomatic location “to give time” gives one at least to think—to think the singular or double condition both of the gift and of time.

What there is to give, uniquely, would be called time.

What there is to give, uniquely, would be called time.

What there is to give, uniquely, would be called time.

For finally, if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it. And this even if or because or to the extent that we never encounter it, we never know it, we never verify it, we never experience it in its present existence or in its phenomenon. The gift itself—we dare not say the gift in itself—will never be confused with the presence of its phenomenon. Perhaps there is nomination, language, thought, desire, or intention only there where there is this movement still for thinking, desiring, naming that which gives itself neither to be known, experienced, nor lived—in the sense in which presence, existence, determination regulate the economy of knowing, experiencing, and living. In this sense one can think, desire, and say only the impossible, according to the measureless measure [mesure sans mesure] of the impossible. If one wants to recapture the proper element of thinking, naming, desiring, it is perhaps according to the measureless measure of this limit that it is possible, po
ble as relation without relation to the impossible. One can desire, name, think in the proper sense of these words, if there is one, only to the immeasurable extent [dans la mesure démésurante] that one desires, names, thinks or already, that one still lets announce itself what nevertheless cannot present itself as such to experience, to knowing: in short, here a gift that cannot make itself (a) present [un don qui ne peut pas se faire présent]. This gap between, on the one hand, thought, language, and desire and, on the other hand, knowledge, philosophy, science, and the order of presence is also a gap between the gift and economy. This gap is not present anywhere; it resembles an empty word or a transcendent illusion. But it also gives to this structure or to this logic a form analogous to Kant’s transcendental dialectic, as relation between thinking and knowing, the noumenal and the phenomenal. Perhaps this analogy will help us and perhaps it has an essential relation to the problem of “giving-time.”

We are going to give ourselves over to and engage in the effort of thinking or rethinking a sort of transcendent illusion of the gift. For in order to think the gift, a theory of the gift is powerless by its very essence. One must engage oneself in this thinking, commit oneself to it, give it tokens of faith [gagner], and with one’s person, risk entering into the destructive circle. One must promise and swear. The effort of thinking or rethinking a sort of transcendent illusion of the gift should not be a simple reproduction of Kant’s critical machinery (according to the opposition between thinking and knowing, and so forth). But neither is it a matter of rejecting that machinery as old-fashioned. In any case, we are implicated in it, in particular because of that which communicates, in this dialectic, with the problem of time on one side, that of the moral law and of practical reason on the other side. But the effort to think the groundless ground of this quasi–transcendent illusion should not be either—if it is going to be a matter of thinking—a sort of adoring and faithful abdication, a simple movement of faith in the face of that which exceeds the limits of experience, knowledge, science, economy—and even philosophy. On the contrary, it is a matter—desire beyond desire—of responding faithfully but also as rigorously as possible both to the injunction or the order of the gift (“give” [“donner”]) as well as to the injunction or the order of meaning (presence, science, knowledge): Know still what giving wants to say, know how to give, know what you want and want to say when you give, know what you intend to give, know how the gift annuls itself, commit yourself [engager] even if commitment is the destruction of the gift by the gift, give economy its chance.

For finally, the overrunning of the circle by the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple, ineffable exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation. It is this exteriority that sets the circle going, it is this exteriority that puts the economy in motion. I: is this exteriority that engages in the circle and makes it turn. If one must render an account (to science, to reason, to philosophy, to the economy of meaning) of the circle effects in which a gift gets annulled, this account-rendering requires that one take into account that which, while not simply belonging to the circle, engages in it and sets off its motion. What is the gift as the first mover of the circle? And how does it contract itself into a circular contract? And from what place? Since when? From whom?

That is the contract, between us, for this cycle of lectures. (Recall that Mauss’s essay The Gift has its premises in his work and that of Davy on the contract and on sworn faith.)

Even if the gift were never anything but a simulacrum, one must still render an account of the possibility of this simulacrum and of the desire that impels toward this simulacrum. And one must also render an account of the desire to render an account. This cannot be done against or without the principle of reason (principium reddendae rationis), even if the latter finds there its limit as well as its resource. Otherwise, why would I commit myself—making it an obligation for myself—to speak and to render an account? Whence comes the law that obligates one to give even as one renders an account of the gift? In other words, to answer [répondre] still for a gift that calls one beyond all responsibility? And that forbids one to forgive whoever does not know how to give?

“I will never forgive him the ineptitude of his calculation,” concludes the narrator of “La fausse monnaie” (“Counterfeit Money”), the brief story by Baudelaire that we will read together. Was he reproaching his friend in effect for not having known how to give? That is one of the questions waiting for us. Here is “Counterfeit Money”:

As we were leaving the tobacconist’s, my friend carefully separated his change; in the left pocket of his waistcoat he slipped small gold coins; in the right, small silver coins; in his left trouser pocket, a handful of pennies and, finally, in the right he put a silver two-franc piece that he had scrutinized with particular care.

“What a singularly minute distribution!” I said to myself.

We encountered a poor man who held out his cap with a trembling hand—I know nothing more disquieting than the mute eloquence of those supplicating eyes that contain at once, for the sensitive man who knows how to read them, so much humility and so much reproach. He finds there something close to the depth of complicated feeling one sees in the tear-filled eyes of a dog being beaten.
My friend's offering was considerably larger than mine, and I said to him: "You are right; next to the pleasure of feeling surprise, there is none greater than to cause a surprise." "It was the counterfeit coin," he calmly replied as though to justify himself for his prodigality.

But into my miserable brain, always concerned with looking for noon at two o'clock (what an exhausting faculty is nature's gift to me!), there suddenly came the idea that such conduct on my friend's part was excusable only by the desire to create an event in this poor devil's life, perhaps even to learn the varied consequences, disastrous or otherwise, that a counterfeit coin in the hands of a beggar might engender. Might it not multiply into real coins? Could it not also lead him to prison? A tavern keeper, a baker, for example, was perhaps going to have him arrested as a counterfeiter or for passing counterfeit money. The counterfeit coin could just as well, perhaps, be the germ of several days' wealth, for a poor little speculator. And so my fancy went its course, lending wings to my friend's mind and drawing all possible deductions from all possible hypotheses.

But the latter suddenly shattered my reverie by repeating my own words: "Yes, you are right; there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for."

I looked him squarely in the eyes and I was appalled to see that his eyes shone with unquestionable candor. I then clearly saw that his aim had been to do a good deed while at the same time making a good deal; to earn forty cents and the heart of God; to win paradise economically; in short, to pick up gratis the certificate of a charitable man. I could have almost forgiven him the desire for the criminal enjoyment of which a moment before I assumed him capable, I would have found something bizarre, singular in his amusing himself by compromising the poor; but I will never forgive him the ineptitude of his calculation. To be mean is never excusable, but there is some merit in knowing that one is; the most irreparable of vices is to do evil out of stupidity.19

Translated by Peggy Kamuf.

Notes

1. Madame de Maintenon's sentence is remarkable enough to have attracted the attention of the *Lettres*. There are those who will be surprised, perhaps, to see me evoke the secret wife of a great king at the beginning of such a lecture. However, Madame de Maintenon seems to me to be exemplary not only because, from her position as woman and "grande dame," she poses the question of the gift, time—and the rest. She who played the role of Louis XIV's "sultan of conscience" was at

the same time—and this configuration is rarely fortuitous—an outlaw and the very figure of the law. Before she became, upon the death of the Queen, the morganatic wife of the King (and thus excluded from all noble titles and rights; the word morganatic says something of the gift and the gift of the origin: it is from low Latin *morganeus*, gift of the morning), she had led the Sun King back to his duties as husband (by estranging him from Madame de Montespan whose protégée she had been) and as Catholic king (by restoring austerity to the court, by encouraging the persecution of the Protestants—even though she herself was raised a Calvinist—and by lending her support to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes). She who took so much trouble over what one had to give and take, over the law, over the name of the King, over legitimacy in general was also the governor of the royal bastards, a promotion she no doubt owed to the protection of Madame de Montespan. Let us stop where we should have begun: When she was a child, she experienced exile in Martinique and her father, Constant, was arrested as a counterfeiter. Everything in her life seems to bear the most austere, the most rigorous, and the most authentic stamp of counterfeited money.

2. "For if love is to give what one does not have..." ("La Direction de la cure," in *Ecrits* [Paris: Le Seuil, 1966], p. 618); "What is thus given to the Other to fill and which is properly what he/she does not have, since for him/her as well Being is lacking, is what is called love, but it is also hatred and ignorance" (Ibid., p. 627); "This privilege of the Other thus sketches out the radical form of the gift of something which it does not have, namely, what is called its love" ("Le signification du phallus," ibid., p. 691); "The Meaning of the Phallus," trans. Jacqueline Rose, *Feminine Sexuality. Jacques Lacan and the "Ecole freudienne,"* eds. Rose and Juliet Mitchell [New York: Norton, 1985], p. 80). The symmetry of these formulae, which seem to concern love in general, is interrupted when the truth of this "not-having-it" appears, namely, the woman *quand maistrem* and the man *quand costruionem* (Encore, vol. 20 of Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller [Paris: Le Seuil, 1975], p. 86), to use a later formula but one which draws together very well this whole economy. Returning, then, to the *Ecrits*:

If it is the case that man manages to satisfy his demand for love in his relationship to the woman to the extent that the signifier of the phallus constitutes her precisely as giving in love what she does not have—conversely, his own desire for the phallus will throw up its signifier in the form of a persistent divergence towards "another woman" who can signify this phallus on several counts, whether as a virgin or a prostitute... We should not, however, think that the type of infidelity which then appears to be constitutive of the masculine function is exclusive to the man. For if one looks more closely, the same redoubling is to be found in the woman, the only difference being that in her case, the Other of Love as such, that is to say, the Other as deprived of that which it gives, is difficult to perceive in the withdrawal whereby it is substituted for the being of the same man whose attributes she cherishes.

The difference of "the only difference being" organizes all the asymmetries analyzed on this page, which, let us remember, concludes as follows: "Correlatively, one can glimpse the reason for a feature which has never been elucidated and which again gives a measure of the depth of Freud's intuition: namely, why he advances the view that there is only one libido, his text clearly indicating that he conceives of it as masculine in nature." (p. 695/84-85; trans. modified).
The expression “to give what one does not have” is found in Heidegger (in particular in “The Anaximander Fragment” [“Der Spruch des Anaximander,” in Holzwege] but also elsewhere); [TN: This conjunction of Lacan and Heidegger is discussed more fully in a later chapter of Given Time.]


5. TN: We will translate engager variously as to involve, to commit, and rarely as to engage. Here and there we will insert the French term as a reminder that engager, which also commonly means to set in motion (as in “to engage a mechanism”), elicits give, that is, pledge, token exchanged in an engagement, a promise or agreement. It marks thereby the symbols of debt that Derrida is concerned with throughout.


7. For example in Fous la censure (Paris: Des femmes, 1987) and the other texts intersecting with it at the point where, precisely, a certain “il y a là” [there is there] intersects with the giving of the gift (pp. 57, 60ff).

8. Of course, this unconditionality must be absolute and unincurred. It must not be simply declared while in fact dependent in its turn on the condition of some context, on some proximity or family tie, be it general or specific (among human beings, for example, to the exclusion of, for example, “animals”). Can there be any gift within the family? But has the gift ever been thought without the family? As for the unconditionality evoked by Louis Hyde in The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), it is explicitly limited to gifts among close friends, relatives, and most often close relatives. Which is to say that it is not what it is or claims to be: unconditional. This is what the literature on organ donation brings out. One of these studies records that the son who donates a kidney to his mother does not want any gratitude from her because she had borne him in the first place. Another who donates to his brother insists that the latter should not feel either indebted or grateful: “those who prize their closeness to the recipient,” notes Hyde, “are careful to make it clear that the gift is not conditional” (p. 69). Earlier, it had been pointed out that if, in fact, something comes back, after the gift, if a restitution takes place, the gift would nevertheless cease to be a gift from the moment this return would be its “explicit condition” (p. 9).

9. See for example the Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis), Gesamtausgabe vol. 65, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1989). A French translation of §267 has recently been proposed by Jean Greisch, in Rue Descartes, an issue titled “Des Grecs” (pp. 213ff). Beginning with the first pages of the Vorlesung, a certain Ereignis is defined as the truth of Being [die Wahrheit des Seins]. “L’être est l’Ereignis [Das Sein ist das Ereignis]” (§267, p. 470); or again: “L’être est (este, s’essence) comme l’Ereignis [Das Sein west als Ereignis]” (§10, p. 30).

10. We will come back to this point much later, in the second volume of this work [Given Time], when we approach a reading of On Time and Being and related texts.


12. Ibid.


15. This circle of the “Kula Ring” is evoked at length by L. Hyde (The Gift, pp. 11ff) at the beginning of a chapter that is itself titled “The Circle” and that opens with these words from Whitman: “The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him—it cannot fail. . . .” In a later chapter, we will evoke once again the scene of the gift and the debt, not as it is studied scientifically, but rather as it is first of all assumed or denied by French sociologists. Let us note here, while citing the work of Americans who are themselves “indebted” to Mauss, that they extend this chain of the debt in a necessary and paradoxical manner. Hyde notes that Mauss’s essay was the “point of departure” for all the research on exchange over the last half century. Citing as well Raymond Firth and Claude Lévi-Strauss, he recognizes a particular debt to Marshall Sahlins, notably to the chapter titled “The Spirit of the Gift” in Sahlins’s Stone Age Economics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972) [EN: Reprinted above], which holds Mauss’s The Gift to be a gift, “applloy a rigoroue explication de texte” to its sources, and situates Mauss’s ideas in the history of political philosophy. “It was through Sahlins’s writings,” says Hyde, “that I first began to see the possibility of my own work, and I am much indebted to him” (p. xvi).


Women on the Market

Luce Irigaray

The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women. Without the exchange of women, we are told, we would fall back into the anarchy (?) of the natural world, the randomness (?) of the animal kingdom. The passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo.

Whatever familial form this prohibition may take in a given state of society, its signification has a much broader impact. It assures the foundation of the economic, social, and cultural order that has been ours for centuries.

Why exchange women? Because they are “scarce [commodities] . . . essential to the life of the group,” the anthropologist tells us. Why this characteristic of scarcity, given the biological equilibrium between male and female births? Because the “deep polygamous tendency, which exists among all men, always makes the number of available women seem insufficient. Let us add that, even if there were as many women as men, these women would not all be equally desirable . . . and that, by definition . . . , the most desirable women must form a minority.”

Are men all equally desirable? Do women have no tendency toward polygamy? The good anthropologist does not raise such questions. A fortiorem why are men not objects of exchange among women? It is because women’s bodies—through their use, consumption, and circulation—provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown “infrastructure” of the elaboration of that social life and culture. The exploitation of the matter that has been sexualized female is so integral a part of our sociocultural horizon that there is no way to interpret it except within this horizon.

In still other words: all the systems of exchange that organize patriarchal societies and all the modalities of productive work that are recognized, valued, and rewarded in these societies are men’s business. The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he “pays” the father or the brother, not the mother . . . ), and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another. The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and “products” are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone.

Which means that the possibility of our social life, of our culture depends upon a ho(m)osexual monopoly? The law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men’s needs/desires, of exchange among men. What the anthropologist calls the passage from nature to culture thus amounts to the institution of the reign of hom(o)s-exualit [hom(m)o-sexualit]. Not in an “immediate” practice, but in its “social” mediation. From this point on, patriarchal societies might be interpreted a societies functioning in the mode of “semblance.” The value of symbolic and imaginary productions is superimposed upon, and even substitutes for, the value of relations of material, natural, and corporal (re)production.

In this new matrix of History, in which man begets man as his own like ness, wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men. The use of an air traffic in women subvert and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexualit, even while they maintain that hom(m)o-sexualit in speculations mirror games, identifications, and more or less rivalrous appropriations which defer its real practice. Reigning everywhere, although prohibited in practice, hom(m)o-sexualit is played out through the bodies of women matter, or sign, and heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for th smooth workings of man’s relations with himself, of relations among men. Whose “sociocultural endogamy” excludes the participation of that other so foreign to the social order: woman. Exogamy doubtless requires that on leave one’s family, tribe, or clan, in order to make alliances. All the same, it does not tolerate marriage with populations that are too far away, too far removed from the prevailing cultural rules. A sociocultural endogamy would thus forbid commerce with women. Men make commerce of them: but they do not enter into any exchanges with them. Is this perhaps all too true because exogamy is an economic issue, perhaps even subvert economy as such? The exchange of women as goods accompanies and stimulates exchanges of other “wealth” among groups of men. The economy—in both the narrow and the broad sense—that is in place in our society thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated like commodities.

Marx’s analysis of commodities as the elementary form of capitalist wealth can thus be understood as an interpretation of the status of woman in so-called patriarchal societies. The organization of such societies, and the operation of the symbolic system on which this organization is based—symbolic system whose instrument and representative is the proper name—
the name of the father, the name of God—contain in a nuclear form the developments that Marx defines as characteristic of a capitalist regime: the submission of “nature” to a “labor” on the part of men who thus constitute “nature” as use value and exchange value; the division of labor among private producer-owners who exchange their women-commodities among themselves, but also among producers and exploiters or exploitees of the social order; the standardization of women according to proper names that determine their equivalences; a tendency to accumulate wealth, that is, a tendency for the representatives of the most “proper” names—the leaders—to capitalize more women than the others; a progression of the social work of the symbolic toward greater and greater abstraction; and so forth.

To be sure, the means of production have evolved, new techniques have been developed, but it does seem that as soon as the father-man was assured of his reproductive power and had marked his products with his name, that is, from the very origin of private property and the patriarchal family, social exploitation occurred. In other words, all the social regimes of “History” are based upon the exploitation of one “class” of producers, namely, women. Whose reproductive use value (reproductive of children and of the labor force) and whose constitution as exchange value underwrite the symbolic order as such, without any compensation in kind going to them for that “work.” For such compensation would imply a double system of exchange, that is, a shattering of the monopolization of the proper name (and of what it signifies as appropriative power) by father-men.

Thus the social body would be redistributed into producer-subjects no longer functioning as commodities because they provided the standard of value for commodities, and into commodity-objects that ensured the circulation of exchange without participating in it as subjects.

Let us now reconsider a few points in Marx’s analysis of value that seem to describe the social status of women.

Wealth amounts to a subordination of the use of things to their accumulation. Then would the way women are used matter less than their number? The possession of a woman is certainly indispensable to man for the reproductive use value that she represents; but what he desires is to have them all. To “accumulate” them, to be able to count off his conquests, seductions, possessions, both sequentially and cumulatively, as measure or standard(s).

All but one? For if the series could be closed, value might well lie, as Marx says, in the relation among them rather than in the relation to a standard that remains external to them—whether gold or phallus.

The use made of women is thus of less value than their appropriation one by one. And their “usefulness” is not what counts the most. Woman’s price is not determined by the “properties” of her body—although her body constitutes the material support of that price.

But when women are exchanged, woman’s body must be treated as an abstraction. The exchange operation cannot take place in terms of some intrinsic, immanent value of the commodity. It can only come about when two objects—two women—are in a relation of equality with a third term that is neither the one nor the other. It is thus not as “women” that they are exchanged, but as women reduced to some common feature—their current price in gold, or phallics—and of which they would represent a plus or minus quantity. Not a plus or a minus of feminine qualities, obviously. Since these qualities are abandoned in the long run to the needs of the consumer, Woman has value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of man’s “labor.”

On this basis, each one looks exactly like every other. They all have the same phantom-like reality. Metamorphosed in identical sublimations, samples of the same indistinguishable work, all these objects now manifest just one thing, namely, that in their production a force of human labor has been expended, that labor has accumulated in them. In their role as crystals of that common social substance, they are deemed to have value.

As commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value. “They manifest themselves therefore as commodities, or have the form of commodities, only in so far as they have two forms, a physical or natural form, and a value form” (p. 55).

But “the reality of the value of commodities differs in this respect from Dame Quickly, that we don’t know ‘where to have it’” (ibid.). Woman, object of exchange, differs from woman, use value, in that one doesn’t know how to take (hold of) her, for since “the value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition. Turn and examine a single commodity, by itself, as we will. Yet in so far as it remains an object of value, it seems impossible to grasp it” (ibid.). The value of a woman always escapes: black continent, hole in the symbolic, breach in discourse. . . . It is only in the operation of exchange among women that something of this—something enigmatic, to be sure—can be felt. Woman thus has value only in that she can be exchanged.

In the passage from one to the other, something else finally exists beside the
possible utility of the “coarseness” of her body. But this value is not found, is not recaptured, in her. It is only her measurement against a third term that remains external to her, and that makes it possible to compare her with another woman, that permits her to have a relation to another commodity in terms of an equivalence that remains foreign to both.

Women-as-commodities are thus subject to a schism that divides them into the categories of usefulness and exchange value; into matter-body and an envelope that is precious but impenetrable, ungraspable, and not susceptible to appropriation by women themselves; into private use and social use.

In order to have a relative value, a commodity has to be confronted with another commodity that serves as its equivalent. Its value is never found to lie within itself. And the fact that it is worth more or less is not its own doing but comes from that to which it may be equivalent. Its value is transcendent to itself, super-natural, ek-static.

In other words, for the commodity, there is no mirror that copies so that it may be at once itself and its own reflection. One commodity cannot be mirrored in another, as man is mirrored in his fellow man. For when we are dealing with commodities the self-same, mirrored, is not “is” own likeness, contains nothing of its properties, its qualities, its skin and hair.

The likeness here is only a measure expressing the fabricated character of the commodity, its trans-formation by man’s (social, symbolic) “labor.” The mirror that envelops and paralyzes the commodity specularizes, speculates (on) man’s “labor.” Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man. In order to serve as such, they give up their bodies to men as the supporting material of specularization, of speculation. They yield to him their natural and social value as a locus of imprints, marks, and mirage of his activity.

Commodities among themselves are thus not equal, nor alike, nor different. They only become so when they are compared by and for man. And the prosopopoeia of the relation of commodities among themselves is a projection through which producers-exchangers make them reenact before their eyes their operations of specula(tiza)tion. Forgetting that in order to reflect (oneself), to speculate (oneself), it is necessary to be a “subject,” and that matter can serve as a support for speculation but cannot itself speculate in any way.

Thus, starting with the simplest relation of equivalence between commodities, starting with the possible exchange of women, the entire enigma of the money form—of the phallic function—is implied. That is, the appropriation-disappropriation by man, for man, of nature and its productive forces, insofar as a certain mirror now divides and travesties both nature and labor. Man endows the commodities he produces with a narcissism that blurs the seriousness of utility, of use. Desire, as soon as there is exchange, “perverts” need. But that perversion will be attributed to commodities and to their alleged relations. Whereas they can have no relationships except from the perspective of speculating third parties.

The economy of exchange—of desire—is man’s business. For two reasons: the exchange takes place between masculine subjects, and it requires a plus-value added to the body of the commodity, a supplement which gives it a valuable form. That supplement will be found, Marx writes, in another commodity, whose use value becomes, from that point on, a standard of value.

But that surplus-value enjoyed by one of the commodities might vary: “just as many a man strumming about in a gorgeous uniform counts for more than when in muff” (p. 60). Or just as “A, for instance, cannot be your majesty to B, unless at the same time majesty B’s eyes assume the bodily form of A, and, what is more, with every new father of the people, changes its features, hair, and many other things besides” (ibid.). Commodities—“things” produced—would thus have the respect due the uniform, majesty, paternal authority. And even God. “The fact that it is value, is made manifest by its equality with the coat, just as the sheep’s nature of a Christian is shown in his resemblance to the Lamb of God” (ibid.).

Commodities thus share in the cult of the father, and never stop striving to resemble, to copy, the one who is his representative. It is from that resemblance, from that imitation of what represents paternal authority, that commodities draw their value—for men. But it is upon commodities that the producers-exchangers bring to bear this power play. “We see, then, all that our analysis of the value of commodities has already told us, is told us by the linen itself, so soon as it comes into communication with another commodity, the coat. Only it betrays its thoughts in that language with which alone it is familiar, the language of commodities. In order to tell us that its own value is created by labor in its abstract character of human labor, it says that the coat, in so far as it is worth as much as the linen, and therefore is value, consists of the same labor as the linen. In order to inform us that its sublime reality as value is not the same as its buckram body, it says that value has the appearance of a coat, and consequently that so far as the linen is value, it and the coat are as like as two peas. We may here remark, that the language of commodities has, besides Hebrew, many other more or less correct dialects. The German ‘werthesim,’ to be worth, for instance, expresses in a less striking manner than the Romance verbs ‘valere,’ ‘valer,’ ‘valoir,’ that the equating of com-
modernity B to commodity A, is commodity A's own mode of expressing its value. "Paris vaut bien une messe" (pp. 60-61).

So commodities speak. To be sure, mostly dialects and patois, languages hard for "subjects" to understand. The important thing is that they be pre-occupied with their respective values, that their remarks confirm the exchangers' plans for them.

The body of a commodity thus becomes, for another such commodity, a mirror of its value. Contingent upon a bodily supplement. A supplement opposed to use value, a supplement representing the commodity's supernatural quality (an imprint that is purely social in nature), a supplement completely different from the body itself, and from its properties, a supplement that nevertheless exists only on condition that one commodity agrees to relate itself to another considered as equivalent: "For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him" (p. 66, n. 1).

This supplement of equivalency translates concrete work into abstract work. In other words, in order to be able to incorporate itself into a mirror of value, it is necessary that the work itself reflect only its property of human labor: that the body of a commodity be nothing more than the materialization of an abstract human labor. That is, that it have no more body, matter, nature, but that it be objectivization, a crystallization as visible object, of man's activity.

In order to become equivalent, a commodity changes bodies. A super-natural, metaphysical origin is substituted for its material origin. Thus its body becomes a transparent body, pure phenomenality of value. But this transparency constitutes a supplement to the material opacity of the commodity.

Once again there is a schism between the two. Two sides, two poles, nature and society are divided, like the perceptible and the intelligible, matter and form, the empirical and the transcendental . . . The commodity, like the sign, suffers from metaphysical dichotomies. Its value, its truth, lies in the social element. But this social element is added on to its nature, to its matter, and the social subordinates it as a lesser value, indeed as nonvalue. Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object, a standardized sign, an exchangeable signifier, a "likeness" with reference to an authoritative model. A commodity—a woman—is divided into two irreconcilable "bodies": her "natural" body and her socially valued, exchangeable body, which is a particularly mimetic expression of masculine values. No doubt these values also express "nature," that is, the expenditure of physical force. But this latter—essentially masculine, moreover—serves for the

fabrication, the transformation, the technicization of natural productions. And it is this super-natural property that comes to constitute the value of the product. Analyzing value in this way, Marx exposes the meta-physicia character of social operations.

The commodity is thus a dual entity as soon as its value comes to possess a phenomenal form of its own, distinct from its natural form: that of exchange value. And it never possesses this form if it is considered in isolation. A commodity has this phenomenal form added on to its nature only in relation to another commodity.

As among signs, value appears only when a relationship has been established. It remains the case that the establishment of relationships cannot be accomplished by the commodities themselves, but depends upon the operation of two exchangers. The exchange value of two signs, two commodities, two women, is a representation of the needs/desires of consumer-exchanger subjects: in no way is it the "property" of the signs/articles/women themselves. At the most, the commodities—or rather the relationships among them—are the material alibi for the desire for relations among men. To this end, the commodity is disinvested of its body and reclothed in a form that makes it suitable for exchange among men.

But, in this value-bearing form, the desire for that exchange, and the reflection of his own value and that of his fellow man that man seeks in it, are ek-stasized. In that suspension in the commodity of the relationship among men, producer-consumer-exchanger subjects are alienated. In order that they might "bear" and support that alienation, commodities for their part have always been dispossessed of their specific value. On this basis, one may affirm that the value of the commodity takes on indifferently any given form of use value. The price of the articles, in fact, no longer comes from their natural form, from their bodies, their language, but from the fact that they mirror the need/desire for exchanges among men. To do this, the commodity obviously cannot exist alone, but there is no such thing as a commodity, either, so long as there are not at least two men to make an exchange. In order for a product—a woman?—to have value, two men, at least, have to invest (in) her.

The general equivalent of a commodity no longer functions as a commodity itself. A preeminent mirror, transcending the world of merchandise, it guarantees the possibility of universal exchange among commodities. Each commodity may become equivalent to every other from the viewpoint of that sublime standard, but the fact that the judgment of their value depends upon some transcendental element renders them provisionally
incapable of being directly exchanged for each other. They are exchanged by means of the general equivalent—as Christians love each other in God, to borrow a theological metaphor dear to Marx.

That ek-static reference separates them radically from each other. An abstract and universal value preserves them from use and exchange among themselves. They are, as it were, transformed into value-invested idealities. Their concrete forms, their specific qualities, and all the possibilities of “real” relations with them or among them are reduced to their common character as products of man’s labor and desire.

We must emphasize also that the general equivalent, since it is no longer a commodity, is no longer useful. The standard as such is exempt from use.

Though a commodity may at first sight appear to be “a very trivial thing, and easily understood, ... it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (p. 81). No doubt, “so far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it. ... But, so soon as [a wooden table, for example] steps forth as a commodity, it is charged into something transcendental. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than ‘table-turning’ ever was” (pp. 81–82).

“The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determining factors of value. For, in the first place, however varied the useful kinds of labor, or productive activities, may be, it is a physiological fact, that they are functions of the human organism” (p. 82), which, for Marx, does not seem to constitute a mystery in any way ... The material contribution and support of bodies in societal operations pose no problems for him, except as production and expenditure of energy.

Where, then, does the enigmatic character of the product of labor come from, as soon as this product takes on the form of a commodity? It comes, obviously, from that form itself. Then where does the enigmatic character of women come from? Or even that of their supposed relations among themselves? Obviously, from the “form” of the needs/desires of man, needs/desires that women bring to light although men do not recognize them in that form. That form, those women, are always enveloped, veiled.

In any case, “the existence of things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labor which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising there-from. [With commodities] it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (p. 83). *This phenomenon has no analogy except in the reli-*
gious world. “In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands” (ibid.). Hence the fetishism attached to these products of labor as soon as they present themselves as commodities.

Hence women’s role as fetish-objects, inasmuch as, in exchanges, they are the manifestation and the circulation of a power of the Phallus, establishing relationships of men with each other?

Hence the following remarks:

**On value.**

It represents the equivalent of labor force, of an expenditure of energy, of toil. In order to be measured, these latter must be abstracted from all immediately natural qualities, from any concrete individual. A process of generalization and of universalization imposes itself in the operation of social exchanges. Hence the reduction of man to a “concept”—that of his labor force—and the reduction of his product to an “object,” the visible, material correlative of that concept.

The characteristics of sexual pleasure* corresponding to such a social state are thus the following: its productivity, but one that is necessarily laborious, even painful; its abstract form; its need/desire to crystallize in a transcendental element of wealth the standard of all value; its need for a material support where the relation of appropriation to and of that standard is measured; its exchange relationships—always rivalrous—among men alone, and so on.

Are not these modalities the ones that might define the economy of (so-called) masculine sexuality? And is libido not another name for the abstraction of “energy” in a productive power? For the work of nature? Another name for the desire to accumulate goods? Another name for the subordination of the specific qualities of bodies to a—neutral!—power that aims above all to transform them in order to possess them? Does pleasure, for masculine sexuality, consist in anything other than the appropriation of nature, in the desire to make it (re)produce, and in exchanges of its/these products with other members of society? An essentially economic pleasure.

Thus the following question: what needs/desires of (so-called) masculine sexuality have presided over the evolution of a certain social order, from its primitive form, private property, to its developed form, capital? But also: to
what extent are these needs/desires the effect of a social mechanism, in part autonomous, that produces them as such?

On the status of women in such a social order.

What makes such an order possible, what assures its foundation, is thus the exchange of women. The circulation of women among men is what establishes the operations of society, at least of patriarchal society. Whose presuppositions include the following: the appropriation of nature by man; the transformation of nature according to “human” criteria, defined by men alone; the submission of nature to labor and technology; the reduction of its material, corporeal, perceptible qualities to man’s practical concrete activity; the equality of women among themselves, but in terms of laws of equivalence that remain external to them; the constitution of women as “objects” that emblematize the materialization of relations among men, and so on.

In such a social order, women thus represent a natural value and a social value. Their “development” lies in the passage from one to the other. But this passage never takes place simply.

As mother, woman remains on the side of (re)productive nature and, because of this, man can never fully transcend his relation to the “natural.” His social existence, his economic structures, and his sexuality are always tied to the work of nature: these structures thus always remain at the level of the earliest appropriation, that of the constitution of nature as landed property, and of the earliest labor, which is agricultural. But this relationship to productive nature, an insurmountable one, has to be denied so that relations among men may prevail. This means that mothers, reproductive instruments marked with the name of the father and enclosed in his house, must be private property, excluded from exchange. The incest taboo represents this refusal to allow productive nature to enter into exchanges among men. As both natural value and use value, mothers cannot circulate in the form of commodities without threatening the very existence of the social order. Mothers are essential to its (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [re]productive of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general). Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it. Their products are legal tender in that order, moreover, only if they are marked with the name of the father, only if they are recognized within his law: that is, only insofar as they are appropriated by him. Society is the place where man engenders himself, where man produces himself as man, where man is born into “human,” “super-natural” existence.

The virginal woman, on the other hand, is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange. In this sense, her natural body disappears into its representative function. Red blood remains on the mother’s side, but it has no price, as such, in the social order; woman, for her part, as medium of exchange, is no longer anything but semblance. The ritualized passage from woman to mother is accomplished by the violation of an envelope: the hymen, which has taken on the value of taboo, the taboo of virginity. Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property, she is removed from exchange among men.

The prostitute remains to be considered. Explicitly condemned by the social order, she is implicitly tolerated. No doubt because the break between usage and exchange is, in her case, less clear-cut? In her case, the qualities of woman’s body are “useful.” However, these qualities have “value” only because they have already been appropriated by a man, and because they serve as the locus of relations—hidden ones—between men. Prostitution amounts to usage that is exchanged. Usage that is not merely potential: it has already been realized. The woman’s body is valuable because it has already been used. In the extreme case, the more it has served, the more it is worth. Not because its natural assets have been put to use this way, but, on the contrary, because its nature has been “used up,” and has become once again no more than a vehicle for relations among men.

Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men’s “activity”; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers’ desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself. . . Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure.

Of course the theoreticians of sexuality are sometimes astonished by women’s frigidity. But, according to them, this frigidity is explained more by an impotence inherent to feminine “nature” than by the submission of that nature to a certain type of society. However, what is required of a “normal” feminine sexuality is oddly evocative of the characteristics of the status of
a commodity. With references to and rejections of the “natural”—physiological and organic nature, and so on—that are equally ambiguous.

And, in addition:

—just as nature has to be subjected to man in order to become a commodity, so, it appears, does “the development of a normal woman.” A development that amounts, for the feminine, to subordination to the forms and laws of masculine activity. The rejection of the mother—imputed to woman—would find its “cause” here;

—just as, in commodities, natural utility is overridden by the exchange function, so the properties of a woman’s body have to be suppressed and subordinated to the exigencies of its transformation into an object of circulation among men;

—just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man but lacks specific qualities of her own. Her value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body;

—just as commodities cannot make exchanges among themselves without the intervention of a subject that measures them against a standard, so it is with women. Distinguished, divided, separated, classified as like and unlike, according to whether they have been judged exchangeable. In themselves, among themselves, they are amorphous and confused: natural body, maternal body, doubtless useful to the consumer, but without any possible identity or communicable value;

—just as commodities, despite their resistance, become more or less autonomous repositories for the value of human work, so, as mirrors of and for man, women more or less unwittingly come to represent the danger of a disappropriation of masculine power: the phallic mirage;

—just as a commodity finds the expression of its value in an equivalent—in the last analysis, a general one—that necessarily remains external to it, so woman derives her price from her relation to the male sex, constituted as a transcendent value: the phallus. And indeed the enigma of “value” lies in the most elementary relation among commodities. Among women. For, uprooted from their “nature,” they no longer relate to each other except in terms of what they represent in men’s desire, and according to the “forms” that this imposes upon them. Among themselves, they are separated by his speculations.

This means that the division of “labor”—sexual labor in particular—requires that woman maintain in her own body the material substratum of the object of desire, but that she herself never have access to desire. The economy of desire of exchange—is man’s business. And that economy subjects women to a schism that is necessary to symbolic operations: reproductive nature/fabricated femininity. ... That schism—characteristic of all speaking nature, someone will surely object—has been experienced by women without any possible profit to them. And without any way for them to transcend it. They are not even “conscious” of it. The symbolic system that cuts them in two this way is in no way appropriate to them. In them, “semblance” remains external, foreign to “nature.” Socially, they are “objects” for and among men and furthermore they cannot do anything but mimic a “language” that they have not produced; naturally, they remain amorphous, suffering from drives without any possible representatives or representations. For them, the transformation of the natural into the social does not take place, except to the extent that they function as components of private property, or as commodities.

Characteristics of this social order

This type of social system can be interpreted as the practical realization of the meta-physical. As the practical destiny of the meta-physical, it would also represent its most fully realized form. Operating in such a way, moreover, that subjects themselves, being implicated in it through and through, being produced in it as concepts, would lack the means to analyze it. Except in an after-the-fact way whose delays are yet to be fully measured . . .

This practical realization of the meta-physical has as its founding operation the appropriation of woman’s body by the father or his substitutes. It is marked by women’s submission to a system of general equivalents, the proper name representing the father’s monopoly of power. It is from this standardization that women receive their value, as they pass from the state of nature to the status of social object. This transformation of women’s bodies into use values and exchange values inaugurates the symbolic order. But that order depends upon a nearly pure added value. Women, animals endowed with speech like men, assure the possibility of the use and circula-
tation of the symbolic without being recipients of it. Their nonaccess to the symbolic is what has established the social order. Putting men in touch with each other, in relations among themselves, women only fulfill this role by relinquishing their right to speech and even to animality. No longer in the natural order, not yet in the social order that they nonetheless maintain, women are the symptom of the exploitation of individuals by a society that remunerates them only partially, or even not at all, for their “work.” Unless subordination to a system that utilizes you and oppresses you should be considered as sufficient compensation...? Unless the fact that women are branded with the proper name—of the “father”—should be viewed as the symbolic payment awarded them for sustaining the social order with their bodies.

But by submitting women’s bodies to a general equivalent, to a transcendent, super-natural value, men have drawn the social structure into an ever greater process of abstraction, to the point where they themselves are produced in it as pure concepts: having surmounted all their “perceptible” qualities and individual differences, they are finally reduced to the average productivity of their labor. The power of this practical economy of the meta-physical comes from the fact that “physiological” energy is transformed into abstract value without the mediation of an intelligible elaboration. No individual subject can be credited any longer with bringing about this transformation. It is only after the fact that the subject might possibly be able to analyze his determination as such by the social structure. And even then it is not certain that his love of gold would not make him give up everything else before he would renounce the cult of this fetish. “The saver thus sacrifices to this fetish all the penchants of his flesh. No one takes the gospel of renunciation more seriously than he.”

Fortunately—if we may say so—women/commodities would remain, as simple “objects” of transaction among men. Their situation of specific exploitation in exchange operations—sexual exchange, and economic, social, and cultural exchanges in general—might lead them to offer a new critique of the political economy. A critique that would no longer avoid that of discourse, and more generally of the symbolic system, in which it is realized. Which would lead to interpreting in a different way the impact of symbolic social labor in the analysis of relations of production.

For, without the exploitation of women, what would become of the social order? What modifications would it undergo if women left behind their condition as commodities—subject to being produced, consumed, valorized, circulated, and so on, by men alone—and took part in elaborating and carrying out exchanges? Not by reproducing, by copying, the “phallocratic” models that have the force of law today, but by socializing in a different way the relation to nature, matter, the body, language, and desire.

From *This Sex Which Is Not One* [1977] translation 1985. Translated by Catherine Porter, with Carolyn Burke.

Notes

This text was originally published as “Le marché des femmes,” in *Sessualità e politica* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978).


2. Ibid., p. 38.

†. EN: Irigaray’s neologism plays on the French ‘homo’ (‘same’) and ‘homme’ (‘man’), drawing attention to the tendency in psychoanalysis and elsewhere to frame “homosexuality” in terms of a male desire for the same.

3. These notes constitute a statement of points that will be developed in a subsequent chapter (of *This Sex Which Is Not One*). All the quotations in the remainder of this chapter are excerpted from Marx’s *Capital*, section 1, chapter 1. (The page numbers given in the text refer to the Modern Library edition, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels, rev. Ernest Untermann [New York: Modern Library, 1906].) Will it be objected that this interpretation is analogical by nature? I accept the question, on condition that it be addressed also, and in the first place, to Marx’s analysis of commodities. Did not Aristotle, a “great thinker” according to Marx, determine the relation of form to matter by analogy with the relation between masculine and feminine? Returning to the question of the difference between the sexes would amount instead, then, to going back through analogy.
Partners and Consumers: Making Relations Visible

Marilyn Strathern

At the 1990 meetings for the British Association for the Advancement of Science, an experimental embryologist expounded an expert’s view to a lay audience.¹ Martin Johnson was concerned to demonstrate the continuity of biological process. A person’s birth begins with primitive gametes laid down when one’s parents were embryos in the grandparental womb. Subsequent development depends not only on genetic coding but on extragenetic influences that operate on chromosomes from the start; these include stimulation from material enveloping the egg,² as well as nutritive and other effects derived from placenta and uterus.

It was a powerful origin story,³ especially in the context of current legislative decisions with respect to the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act (1990). Here, however, the problem has been to formulate discontinuities between developmental phases. The House of Commons decided that research on human embryos is permissible up to fourteen days, by which time, among other things, the pre-embryonic material is now discernably divided into those cells that will form the future embryo-fetus and those that will form the placenta. The Secretary for Health was reported as saying that status as an individual could begin only at the stage where cells could be differentiated.⁴ Yet while biology appeared to provide an index,⁵ the further problem of personhood raised the same notion of continuous process. Another member of the Commons pointed out: “It is a very difficult matter to say at what stage do you have a citizen, a human being. At various stages fresh rights are acquired.”⁶ Rights can only be acquired of course, in this view, if there is an individual person to bear them.⁷

Here are experts informing lay persons (the BAAS talk), experts informing experts (the Secretary for Health is briefed on what the fourteen-day stage means), and lay persons (Members of Parliament) turning expert in making legislative decisions. An anthropologist might wish to bracket all of them lay insofar as they promote a common view of the person that, in his/her eyes, must have the status of a folk model. For the anthropological expert, “person” is an analytic construct whose utility is evinced through cross-cultural comparison. One draws, as always, from one’s culture of origin, but to be an expert in anthropology is to demonstrate simultaneously the cultural origins of one’s analytic constructs and their cross-cultural applicability.

A person cannot in this sense be seen without the mediation of analysis. Yet those who discuss the potential personhood of the embryo implicitly contest such an appropriation of the concept. Visual representations of first the division of cells and then the human form as it takes shape regularly accompany not just talks designed to popularize the findings of science but attempts to make vivid the political issues at stake.⁸ Indeed, a flurry of fascination/expulsion was created by the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Children which in April (while the Act was still in debate) sent all 650 MPs a life-sized model of a twenty-week-old fetus. This parody of the ubiquitous free gift was intended to mobilize a parallel concern over the limit for legal abortions. The plastic fetus lifted out from a sectional womb,⁹ and its message was clear. One can “see” a (potential) person, and a person is known by its individuality. Individuality in turn means a naturally entire and free-standing entity: the claim was that at twenty weeks a fetus is a viable whole.

Between the anthropologist as expert and the layperson with his or her folk model lies more than an epistemological issue over what is usefully designated a “person”; there is an ontological issue over the nature of the category. The anthropologist is dealing with a category that refers to certain analytical constructions. The layman may argue over what they see and what they call it but take for granted that the category refers to persons existing as visible and substantial entities. So while it may be hard to tell when a person begins, and while the law may have to define the stages at which rights accrue, it seems self-evident that the subject of these debates is a concrete human being. The anthropologist is not, of course, untouched by this cultural certitude.

Now for “person” one could write “gift.” That concept was drawn into anthropology from various domains of Western or Euro-American discourse (economy, theology, and so forth) though its most notable proponents made out of the indigenous connotation of presentations voluntarily made an analytical category that also included the social fact of obligation. The point is that the concept of gift seemed readily applicable to self-evident and concrete “gifts.” The term trialed a reassuring visualism. One could “see” gift exchange because one could see the gifts, the things that people exchanged with one another. It also trialed a concern, as Panoff, Parry, and others have noted, with individual autonomy (voluntarism) and interpersonal relations measured by degrees of interestedness (altruism).¹⁰
As an anthropologist I am crippled, so to speak, by expertise—by the desire to appropriate the category "gift" in a special way, insofar as those negotiations of relationships known as gift exchange in Melanesia have a character whose uniqueness I would be reluctant to relinquish. I say crippled to the extent that this position appears to set up barriers. Blind: I do not believe the evidence of my eyes, that one will recognize a gift when one sees it. Constricted: I cannot stride across the world map looking for gifts at all times and places. The wrong color: monochrome rather than polychrome, for exhilarating as the company of other disciplines can be, I lose appropriative capability, feel very lay in the presence of other expertise. Other knowledge does not necessarily repair deficiencies in one's own. Not something that concerns Melanesians, one should add for they borrow from foreigners all the time, including the most intimate powers of reproduction.

Melanesians borrow origin stories, wealth, and—as in the area I know best (Mount Hagen)—the expertise by which to organize their religion and their future. One clan takes from another its means of life. Indeed, exchanges surrounding the transfer of reproductive potential are intrinsic to the constitution of identity. From a clan's point of view, foreign wives are drawn to them by virtue of bridewealth, and such items of wealth are themselves considered to have reproductive potential. Pigs create pigs and money creates money, as shell valuables also reproduce themselves, an idea given visible form in the iconography that developed with the influx of pearshells into the Hagen area at the time of contact. Shells for circulation in gift exchange were mounted on resin boards vividly colored with red ochre. The whole appeared a free-standing entity. But it was not an image of one. Rather than plastic molding a visible homunculus, the child/embryo in its netbag/womb was indicated in the abstract by the curvature of the shell crescent, and the resin molded a container around it. 

**Personalized Commodities?**

In taking off from some of the expert discourse of Melanesian anthropology, I confine myself to certain issues in the understanding of gifts, namely those concerned with reproduction and the life cycle. It is arguable that all Melanesian gift exchanges are "reproductive," but I make a more restricted point. The reason is to provide an approximation of the indigenous Euro-American understanding of gifts as "transactions within a moral economy, which [make] possible the extended reproduction of social relations." This account ignores those aspects of the Melanesian gift that have seemed most strange to the twentieth-century Westerner (competition and the political striving for prestige), in order to focus on the apparently familiar (the celebration of kinship).

From the perspective of the Papua New Guinea Highlands, of the kind that Lederman has described for Mendi, I thus appear to privilege one nexus of giving (kinship-based) over another (clan-based). Or, more accurately, to evoke one type of sociality, for it is also arguable that each set of relations transforms the moral base of the other. But my interest is not in the relative moralities of exchanges. It is in whether Melanesian giving can illuminate the very idea of there being part-societies ("moral economies") that "typically consist of small worlds of personal relationships that are the emotional core of every individual's social experiences" (GE 15).

Whatever parallels might be useful for earlier European materials, in the late twenty century any understandings of such part-societies must in turn be put into their specific Euro-American context: consumer culture. Cheal himself goes on to give a consumerist definition of sociality. Everywhere (he says) people live out their lives in small worlds; the primitive (he says) because the societies were small, the modern because people "prefer to inhabit intimate life worlds" (GE 15). Now recent anthropological discussion of the gift has turned, among other things, on the analytic advantage of distinguishing gift-based economies from commodity-based ones. Gregory has been notable here, and while his arguments explicated the contrast between gifts and commodities in terms of production, they have also opened up the question of consumption. In the formula he adopts, it is through consumption that things are drawn into the reproduction of persons, and reproduction can be understood as a process of personification. But consumption as a universal analytic is one thing. I take my own cue from the further fact that we live in a self-advertised "consumer" culture.

A consumer culture is a culture, one might say, of personalization. And to Euro-Americans, gift-giving seems a highly personalized form of transactions. After all, it was the person in the gift that attracted anthropological attention to the concept in the first place. But whether useful parallels can be drawn between the personalizations of consumerism and the personifications of Melanesian gift exchange remains to be seen.

**Free-standing Entities**

The notorious individualism of Western culture has always seemed an abstraction of the state or of the market economy that lies athwart those concrete persons we recognize in interactions with others. No one is really an isolate. This was a point the embryologist wanted to get across, and for which he offered biological reasoning.

Johnson was concerned to demonstrate the influence of the environment in all stages of fetal development. Its significance for him lies in its contribution to the identity of the emergent individual: personal identity is
the outcome not just of a unique genetic combination but of a unique history of continuous development which affects the way genetic factors themselves take effect. The organism is a finite and discrete entity; the process is continuous. Thus, he opined, an individual is always in interaction with its environment. This provoked a comment from the gynecologist Modell who observed that, as far as the embryo is concerned, the environment is immediately the mother and the mother is another person. Among other things, the embryo undergoes the effects of the parent’s changing perceptions of it.

The point slid by without much comment. What I see in that interchange is more than a dispute among experts, for it barely registered as a dispute. It epitomized the simultaneous delineation of a hegemonic model (of personhood) and the possibility of contesting it, somewhat parallel to the manner in which anthropologists have extricated the idea of gift from hegemonic understandings in Western culture in order to contest either the application of these understandings to non-Western cultures or the dominance of the model in people’s lives. Modell’s mild intervention sounded, in fact, almost like a version of critiques well rehearsed through the contested notion of rights in abortion debates. The right of the mother against the right of the child presents a contest of alternatives. However, I wish to make a different kind of contest appear.

Johnson’s idea of the individual person doubtfully defined by genetic programming and by environmental factors seems a solution to the old nature/nurture debate: we have, so to speak, put the individual back into its “environment,” in much the same way as social scientists are perpetually putting individuals back into “society.” This is an individualism that gives full recognition to the context in which persons flourish, and we may read off from the image of the embryo an image of the individual person in a responsive, interactive, and creative mode with the external world. Indeed, it is colloquial English to speak of an individual’s “relationship” to its environment as we do of an individual’s “relationship” to society.

But what a bizarre coupling! The whole person is held to be a substantial and visible entity. The environment, on the other hand, like society, is regularly construed as existing in the abstract, for it cannot be seen as a whole. We may concretize the environment through examples of its parts, as uterus or as trees and mountains, as we may concretize society through referring to groups and institutions. But there was more to Johnson’s purpose. He wished to convey how it is potentially everything beyond the individual person that may influence that unique person and help make it what it is. The forces that continuously shape us are always, as he comments elsewhere, both genetic and epigenetic, and “epigenetic” is the biologist’s catchall “for everything else besides the genes.” I would add that this makes the latter of a different order from the former precisely insofar as they are imagined, hypothetically and thus abstractly, as infinite. “Myriad” is his word; the environment consists in this view of the sum of all the factors that might have an effect.

The view against which Johnson argues would hold that the whole and finite individual is determined largely by its genetic programming. But rather than contest, perhaps we should see analogy between the conceptualizations here. Suppose the concept of the genetic program were analogous to that of the individual, then the concept of epigenetic forces would appear analogous to that of environment/society. In turn, the relationship between genetic and epigenetic forces that Johnson postulates would be seen to miniaturize or replicate commonsense understandings of that between individual organism and enveloping world. And the interest of Modell’s remark would be in the way it cut across the analogies. For she displaced the image of a (finite, concrete) person contextualized by an (infinite, abstract) society/environment with another image: the exterior world imagined as another (finite, concrete) person.

She thus gave voice to a capability that also rests in English: of imagining a world that does not imagine such abstractions for itself, where sociality impinges in the presence of other persons. English speakers readily enough personify the agency of “society” or even “environment,” though they would be hard put to think of these entities as persons. Yet that is exactly the way in which they might imagine that Melanesians imagine the world beyond themselves. What contains the child is indeed “another person,” whether that other person is the mother, or the clan that nurtures its progeny, or the land that nurtures the clan and receives a fertilizing counterpart in the burial of the placenta. This other person may be regarded as the cause or origin of the effective agency of those it contains.

When Euro-Americans think of more than one person, they are faced with the disjunction of unique individuals and overcome this in the notion that individuals “relate” to one another. What lies between them are relationships, so that society may be thought of as the totality of made relationships. That relationships are made further supposes that what are linked are persons as individual subjects or agents who engage in their making: “[t]he result of socially constructed ties between human agents” (GE 11). The idea of persons in the plural evokes, then, the image of the interactions between them, in turn the immediate social environment for any one of them.

It is because society is likened to an environment that it is possible for Euro-Americans to think of individual persons as relating not to other per-
sons but to society as such, and to think of relations as after the fact of the individual’s personhood rather than integral to it. Or so the folk model goes. Anthropologists, for their part, have captured the category of person to stand for subjects understood analytically in the context of social relations with others. In the particular way she/he looks to making “society” visible, the anthropologist would be scandalized at the idea of a nonrelation definition of persons.

The analytical necessity appears to have been given by just such societies as are found in Melanesia. Indeed, the anthropological experience may be that in such societies everything is relational. Certainly Melanesians constantly refer to the acts and thoughts of other persons. But if they seemingly situate themselves in a world full of what we call “social relationships,” such relationships do not link individuals. Rather, the fact of relating forms a background sociality to people’s existence, out of which people work to make specific relationships appear. Relations are thus integral to the person or, in Wagner’s formulation, persons may be understood fractally: their dimensionality cannot be expressed in whole numbers. The fractal person is an entity with relationships integrally implied. Any scale of social activity mobilizes the same dimensionality of person/relationship.

There is no axiomatic evaluation of intimacy or closeness here. On the contrary, people work to create divisions between themselves. For in the activation of relations people make explicit what differentiates them. One may put it that it is the relationship between them that separates donor from recipient or mother from child. Persons are detached, not as individuals from the background of society or environment, but from other persons. However, detachment is never final, and the process is constantly recreated in people’s dealings with one another. To thus be in a state of division with respect to others renders the Melanesian person dividual.

Persons are not conceptualized, therefore, as free-standing. A Hagen clan is composed of its agnates and those foreigners detached from other clans who will give birth to its children; a woman contains the child that grows through the acts of a man; shells are mounted on the breast. One person may “carry” another, as the origin or cause of its existence and acts. An implicate field of persons is thus imagined in the division or dispersal of bodies or body parts. From their viewpoint, Western Euro-Americans cannot readily think of bodies and body parts as the substance of people’s interactions. They can imagine objects flowing between persons “as though” they “symbolized” body parts, but for them to discover that a shell is like a fetus in a womb is simply to uncover an image, a metaphorical statement about (say) fertility. So let me return to the embryologist’s address and to a moment when he seemed at a loss for a metaphor.

During his presentation, Johnson flashed on the screen a picture of twin babies with their common placenta between them. The three were genetically identical, he briefly observed. Three what? One may fill in the silence, that of course they were not three persons, for only the twins, not the placenta, would grow into autonomous subjects. The placenta is regarded as a source of support, at once part of the fetus and part of the fetus’s environment, yet only through detachment from it is the individual person made; the picture included the cut cords and the scissors that cut them. Not at all how the Melanesian ‘Are’Are of Malaita in the Solomon Islands would see it. There the placenta both remains part of the person and, in becoming detached at birth, is treated as another person. Detachment is conceptualized as a separation of (dividual) persons from one another.

De Coppel describes how the placenta is buried in ancestral land, linking the living person to a network of ancestral funeral sites and returning to source two vital parts of personal substance. It is planted like a dead taro that has lost its living stem (the baby); taro denotes “body.” The ‘Are’Are placenta is also referred to as the baby’s pig, an allusion to animate “breath.” (What the placenta lacks is a third part, the ancestral “image” that adults assume when they die naturally, that is, are killed by their own ancestors; the unimaged placenta is buried somewhat after the manner of an unimaged murder victim.) Pig and taro assure the vitality of the living child; it is also expected that scavenging pigs will eat the buried placenta and that taro will grow there. The land that nourishes the food that nourishes the child is also constituted of what constitutes the living person and is a cause of its life. ‘Are’Are personify the land, territorialize the person. When one understands how the land owns people, de Coppel was told, one can understand how people own land.

This relationship to the land is not quite the same as the English-speaking conceptualization of a (concrete) person’s relationship to the (abstract) environment/society. For the ‘Are’Are person (land) thereby enters into an exchange with the land (person). If your placenta has been buried, it “proves that, in return for your life, through the land, you have given back the share of ‘body’ and ‘breath’ which must rejoin the universal circulation.” It is for such a world as this, where persons’ actions always seem to be caused by or elicited by other “persons,” that the borrowed concept of the gift captures what a Westerner would sense as a pervasive sociality. It seems just the formula to emphasize the personal nature of interpersonal relations. Perhaps that is because gifts in turn typify a sector of Western culture which seemingly parallels the pervasive sociality of Melanesian life: the close interpersonal relations of kinship and friendship. Here one gives and takes on an intimate basis. Yet the appearance of similarity is, inevitably,
misleading. Euro-American intimacy is signaled by two constructs peculiar to it, altruism and voluntarism.

Altruism: Donors and Partners

Advances in reproductive medicine that have highlighted artificial mechanisms to assist procreation have also heightened certain Western perceptions of the interaction between procreating partners. Thus in the context of discussing artificial insemination by donor Sissu recalls the assumption “that semen is donated, the uterus only loaned.” That parenthood should in addition be thought a matter of opinion, maternity a matter of fact, turns not on the certainty about donation but on certainty about social identity. It is because semen has the appearance of a (visible) detachable bodily substance that it seems alienable. Because it is alienable, its source may be in doubt. Both the substantial nature of semen and the asymmetry of the relationship between semen and uterus (individual and environment) present an inverse of the supposition found in Aristotle, that semen provided form and maternal blood the substance of the child. The potency of semen in this ancient view was that it was efficacious in the way a craftsman’s activities were efficacious; it had an activating force on female blood but did not contribute particles of matter to the embryo. The movement of the male body, the act of donation, constituted the male part in procreation.

Sissu draws the inevitable parallel with the Trobriands, between the multiple fathering made possible by insemination by donor and the fact (as she puts it) that the Trobriand child has two fathers, one whose semen molds somatic identity and one (the mother’s brother) who defines the kin group to which the child belongs. Yet the parallel is a poor one, since the social identity of the Trobriand father is integral to his somatic role, whereas in the case of DI knowing the father’s identity is both optional and after the fact of the donation. Donation linking a person to a source of genetic endowment does not necessarily link the person to another person. Indeed, twentieth-century people who talk of semen “donation” treat it as a substance that will fertilize the maternal egg whether or not its identity is known. This is the crux. Semen is potentially alienable (from the body), I suggest, because of the possibility of its being produced without being elicited by another person. This is, in turn, a general conceptual possibility, regardless of whether or not DI is at issue, captured in its visual representation as a detachable substance. DI adds the further conceptual possibility that conception need not be accompanied by bodily movement; movement is only required to produce the semen. Sissu points out that Aristotle’s emphasis on the transcendent and nonsubstantial aspect of the semen led him to assert it could never be frozen, whereas twentieth-century people keep frozen specimens in banks for future use.

Nonetheless, the new reproductive technologies have repaired some of the asymmetry, for it would seem that “egg donation” has passed into the lay imagination as a process analogous to semen donation. Anonymity may or may not be preserved. In the case of maternal surrogacy, however, a partnership of a kind has to be set up between the commissioning couple and the surrogate mother. People talk crudely of womb-renting, or more delicately of the gift of life.

Donation is here conceptualized in two ways. On the one hand it may simply involve an act of bodily emission intended for an anonymous recipient; on the other hand it may involve a relationship between donors and recipients as partners in a single enterprise. This corresponds to the double conceptualization of sociality in consumer culture, as much a matter of an individual’s relationship to society in the abstract as of interaction between concrete persons.

The terminology of donation and gift is seemingly encouraged by clinical and other experts by virtue of this double evocative power. It evokes the charitable altruism of blood and organ donors; it also evokes the intimate altruism of transactions that typify personal relations outside the market. (1) Organ donors can give anonymously because human organs are regarded as anonymous: kidneys differ in physical condition rather than social identity. Such organs or materials as can be excised or secreted from the body become freestanding entities. So although semen carries formative genetic material that will contribute to a person’s identity, it is also possible to think of contributing one’s part to a general supply. Donation here carries connotations of the charitable gesture, the personal sacrifice for the public good, a gift to society. (2) Alternatively, sometimes in the case of egg donation and certainly of willingness to carry a child, altruism may be embedded in specific relations. A partnership is created between donor and recipient. An egg donated from a close relative can thus be regarded as belonging to a relationship that already exists, an expression of love. The carrying mother, related or not, is regarded as sacrificing comfort and ease in order to enable others to have children; because of the nature of her labor and the attempt to protect such acts from commercial exploitation, as in the case of charity the language of gift-giving becomes the language of altruism.

But do these gestures and does this language constitute a gift economy? Cheal has argued exactly this, in examining the nexus of present-giving among friends and relatives, as at Christmas and birthdays, in suburban Canada (see GE). Gifts indicate community membership (the reproduction of social status) as well as relations of intimacy. In either case, they symbolize the central values of a “love culture,” he argues, whether the love is generally or specifically directed. We encounter here the same double: gifts
for society and gifts for persons. Cheal introduces a further distinction between the immediate society of the moral economy (his “small world,” the real community) and the further society of the political economy. Gifts make gestures of altruism within, it would seem, the near society, whereas the far society is seen as a realm of commerce. It is in their immediate circles that persons “make” relationships as they “make” love, and community-giving is a diffuse, impersonal version of intimacy-giving.

While I would dispute neither the evocation of emotions and (society-near) relational behavior among friends and relatives nor the way this mobilizes conventions distinct from those that regulate other (society-far) areas of life, I add one comment: the circulation of gifts does not create distinct kinds of persons. “Gifts” (presents) are free-standing entities just like commodities, alienable, as Cheal says. Indeed the person who purchases a present to give to a friend simply puts it in reverse the process which makes it possible for him/her to donate body substance to a blood bank, cadaver to science. An anonymously-produced object becomes part of a store on which others draw. Preserving the social anonymity of market goods is of course fundamental to the supposition that goods are available for all. That such gifts can be appropriated by the consumer and fashioned to the ends of personal identity—the wrapped present, the exhibited taste—is part of the cultural interpretation of consumption as consumerism.

While they may express personal identity, goods do not have to be made into gifts in order to do so. Gifts between persons can make statements about relationships, yet a relationship is not necessary to the creation of identity. The analogy with reproductive process is evident: genetic identity does not imply a social relationship.

As I understand it, what Euro-Americans call gifts in late twentieth-century consumer culture, whether body substance or merchandise, are regarded as extensions of the self insofar as they carry the expression of sentiments. Sentiments are commonly expressed toward other persons, but they may equally well be directed to abstract entities such as “society.” For sentiments emanate from the person, whether or not they are “received” by specific others. They thus appear as the person would like to appear, autonomous, charitable. Sentiment is supposed to have positive connotations in the same way as near relations are supposed to be benign, and presents carry positive overtones of sociability and affection. Hence Cheal’s cloistered language of community and intimacy.

Indeed, the kinds of presents Cheal describes are like the “goods” of classical economy: objects of desire. It is individuals, he observes, who give and receive goods and who reproduce their relations with others, though they do so, I would add, from their own vantage point (of desire). Cheal himself offers a comparison (GE 10); he takes the free disposition of items as distinguishing the gift in the moral economy of suburban Canada from those reciprocities allegedly described by Gregory that put people into a state of (his term not Gregory’s) bondage. It is the alienability of the former that confers freedom. The sentiment such items express springs from within the individual person, and it is the flow of sentiment (the ideology of love) that makes relationships. As a consequence Euro-American gift-giving really only works as a sign of personal commitment if it is also a sign of benign feeling. Benign feeling in turn is presented as an attribute of the small-scale, with its dialectic of intimacy and community. This confident equation of the small-scale with the interpersonal is, to say the least, an interesting cultural comment on the dimensions of persons.

Where the cycling of gifts among kin effects the procreation and regeneration of relationships, this can comprise activity of a cosmic order. Consider the Melanesian Sabarl on the eastern tip of the Massim archipelago. Not only is this tiny dialect group of fewer than a thousand people able to account for the beginning of time, their gift exchanges are of universal dimensions. No part-societies here, the entire system of production, distribution, and consumption is a process of personification “that converts food and objects and people into other people.” And society does not exist apart from other people, rather, persons are of global dimensions, sociality integral to them. This is made evident by their parentage. A person is forever a dependant with respect to his or her father’s clan, with whom he/she is involved in a lifetime of exchanges. Dependency is conceptualized in terms of specific relations: a member of the father’s clan acts as a designated “father” to the eternal “child” whom he “feeds,” an activity that lasts from conception till burial when it must be stopped. In this matrilineal society, paternal kin are keepers of mortality and the father’s donations have effect (only) for as long as the child lives. This is no more nor less “bondage” than one might say one is a slave to life or, in Aristotle’s terms, a victim of paternal motility.

The partner in such exchanges is always another and specific person. Gifts are never free-standing: they have value because they are attached to one social source (“father”) in being destined for another (“child”) and, whether they originate in labor or in other transactions, carry identity. Yet when all such encounters are interpersonal encounters, they convey no special connotations of intimacy. Nor of altruism as a source of benign feeling.

The Western notion of persons being contained by their environment/society is indeed significant here, though not quite for Johnson’s reasons. It enables Euro-Americans to think of the gift as altruistic by the conceivably analogical gesture toward exactly such abstract entities. Altruistic
gestures toward other persons are invariably tempered by the aftereffect of realizing that one’s own self-interest must be bound up somewhere, if only in maintaining one’s (social) environment. Conversely, it is possible to think of gifts as voluntarily given despite social pressure and obligation precisely because they conventionally typify those relations that are made through the spontaneous emission of emotions.

Voluntarism: Recipients and Consumers

Consumer culture, it would seem, springs from the perpetual emanations of desire held to radiate from each individual person. This wellspring is like the bottomless pit of need that Euro-Americans are also supposed to suffer, such as the celebrated biological need for women to have children—a “drive to reproduce.”46 In meeting need and desire, the individual person expresses the essential self. A rhetoric of accumulation is thus bound to the voluntarism of individual effort. One might remark that the constant necessity for the individual to implement his or her subjectivity has its own coercive force.

If there is a similarity between the coerctions of gift-giving in Melanesia and late-twentieth-century consumerism, then we may indeed find its echo in the desire/drive/need for the individual to act as a free agent. With two differences. One, that on the Melanesian side the need is located not in the agent but in those “other persons” who cause the agent to act. Two, that Melanesian accumulation is tempered by the fact that acts, like relations, work to substitutive effect. Relations are not perpetually “made.” Rather, relations are either made to appear or appear in their making; every new relationship displaces a former one. Each gift is a substitution for a previous gift. One extracts from another what one has had extracted from oneself. Thus de Coppet points to the chain of transformations that constitute the common task on which ‘A’re‘A’re society is based. An endless process of perpetual dissolution by which “objects, animals, persons, or elements of persons” change continuous decay into life.47

As elsewhere in Austronesian-speaking Melanesia,48 a death divides survivors into mourners (feast givers) and workers (who bury the deceased and are feasted). In ‘A’re‘A’re each side makes a pile of food, topped with money, which reconstitutes the dead person. Not only do both piles incorporate food items from the other, the two piles are then exchanged. They replace the deceased with a composition both of the relations once integral to him or her, and of his or her basic elements, “body” (taro and coconut), “breath” (pork), and “image” (money). These replacements enable the deceased’s body/breath to be consumed, later themselves replaced by a further display composed entirely of money. First the workers take charge of it, then reassemble it for the mourners (the deceased’s family) to dispose of, the latter return all the wealth received in the course of the funeral and thereby complete the final element, the ancestor’s image.49 The new ancestor is now accessible to his living descendants.

De Coppet refers to “replacement” rather than substitution50 which for him carries too many resonances of displacing one individual object by another. Yet, as we have seen, what are also replaced are not just the elements that compose an individual but the relationships of which the person is composed. A relationship is “replaced” through the substitution of a counterpart. The point is explicit in Battaglia’s account of Sabarí mortuary ritual, where the actions of mourning and burial mobilize the respective maternal and paternal kin of the deceased. That person is visibly reconstituted in the assembling of funeral foods (sago pudding) and wealth (axe blades), simultaneously semen and bones being returned by maternal kin to the paternal.

These are gifts of life. Life is given in the necessity to consume the deceased as a physical presence and thus release the future—the ancestor to future descendants—from present relationships. As a consequence, the relations that composed and supported the deceased must be made finally visible. Most importantly, in the course of the funeral feasts, relations between maternal and paternal kin appear in the division between donors and recipients. The “father” makes a final presentation of axe blades; maternal kin then substitute for these blades of their own and hand back the items with increment. But more than this. Food and valuables are composed into an image of the deceased before being given to the maternal kin. The Sabarí deceased is thus rendered into a form at once visible (in the abstract) and dissoluble (in its substance): its components can be consumed or dissipated. “[P]eople consume other people.”51 The dead die because the link between persons out of which the person was born is dissolved.

Insofar as one might imagine elements of this exchange sequence as involving the transfer of gifts, the obligation to receive cannot be reduced to the enactment of any one particular exchange. For the person to die, relationships must be undone. And once the person has died, paternal kin on Sabarí can no more avoid being the recipients of funeral gifts than the maternal body in Western discourse can avoid bearing a child.

Sabarí recipients are also consumers: that is, they turn these things (food, valuables) into their own bodies (to be eaten, distributed). Similarly de Coppet suggests that ‘A’re‘A’re life is dominated by the fact that it is one’s own kin who have the ultimate right to consume one, body and breath being thereby absorbed back into body and breath to be available for future generations. The capacity to consume is thus the capacity to sub-
stitute future relations for past ones. It depends on a double receptivity—to reabsorb parts of oneself and to be open to the (body) parts of others. The difference between death and life is the absence or presence of such relationships with "other" persons.

The Melanesian recipient of a gift who puts wealth into the recesses of a house, as a clan contains the external sources of its fertility within, is literally "consuming" the gift. But the vitalizing power of the gift lies in the fact that it derives from an exogenous source. One attaches and contains the parts of specific others, for the process of attachment and detachment is the mortality that signals life. Actions are registered (fractally) in the actions of other persons, each person’s acts being thereby replaced, reconstituted, in new and even foreign persons/forms. Thus is the living person personified.

By contrast, the latter-day Euro-American consumer draws from an impersonal domain, such as the market, goods that, in being turned into expressions of self-identity, become personalized. The exercise of choice is crucial; choice creates consumption as a subjective act. To evince subjectivity is to evince life. One may even appear to exercise "more" subjectivity in some situations/relationships than in others. This rather bizarre notion—that ideally one ought always to act as a subject but cannot always do so—is symbolized in the special domain of interpersonal relations.

The Euro-American person is presented, then, as a potentially free-standing and whole entity (an individual subject or agent) contained within an abstract impersonal matrix which may include other persons but also includes other things as its context (environment/society). And this is the image of the consumer. Consumer choice is thinkable, I would suggest, precisely insofar as "everything else" is held to lie beyond the fetus/embryo/person: anything consumed by that person comes from the outside, whether or not the source is other persons. For generative power lies in the individual person’s own desire for experience. Desire and experience: the principal dimensions of the consumer’s relationship with his/her environment. And the field is infinite; it consists of the sum of all the possibilities that may be sampled. Satisfied from without, the impetus is held to spring from within. While individual desires may be stimulated by the outside world—advertising, marketing, and so forth—that in turn is supposed to be oriented to the consumer’s wants.

Whereas the Melanesian capacity to receive has to be nurtured in and elicited from a partner, sometimes to the point of coercion, the twentieth-century consumer is depicted as having infinite appetite. Above all, the consumer is a consumer of experience and thus of him/her self. Perhaps it is against the compulsion of appetite, the coercion of having to choose, the prescriptiveness of subjective self-reference, that the possibility of unhidden goods and unanticipated experiences presents itself as exotic. The "free gift."

My assertions have no doubt resisted certain commonsense formulations (one cannot see a gift) only to substitute others (we know what a consumer is). And to suggest that the issues which the concept of the gift trails through anthropological accounts—a relational view of the person, altruism, voluntarism—have to be understood in terms of its culture of origin is hardly original. But perhaps the particular substitution I mention here has interest. Given the part that so-called gift exchange plays in the reproduction of persons in Melanesia, it was not inapposite to consider the new language of gifting that accompanies the propagation of late-twentieth-century reproductive technologies. There we discover the Euro-American person as a free-standing entity interacting with its environment, a figure missing from the twentieth-century Melanesian pantheon. The first question to ask, then, is what kind of person the Melanesian gift reproduces.

The double orientation of gifts in consumer culture presupposes two kinds of relationships: an individual person’s interpersonal relations with others and an individual person’s relations with society. Melanesian gifts on the other hand presuppose two kinds of persons, partners divided by their transaction: paternal from maternal kin, fetus from placenta, clansmen from the ground they cultivate, descendents from ancestors. Gifts may come from an outside source, but that source is hardly imagined as beyond persons in the way the talents and the riches of the world seemingly come from God in Davis’s sixteenth-century France. For even where the other person is imagined as a deity or spirit or as the very land itself, the Melanesian act of giving that divides recipient from donor presupposes a partnering of finite identities. By contrast, the gift capable of extending a personalized self into a potentially infinite universe turns the person into a potential recipient of everything.

Late twentieth-century and Euro-American, the embryo visualized as a homunculus is a consumer in the making. For the consumer actualizes his or her relationship with society/the environment in its own body process. This prompts a second question: whether gift-giving in a consumer culture contests the coercive nature of this relationship or is another example of it.


Notes
This was initially presented to the conference on The Gift and Its Transformations, organized by Natalie Davis, Rena Lederman, and Ronald Sharp, National Humanities Center, N.C., November 1990. I am most grateful for comments from the participants. I should add that I have retained the original mode of address, since the paper was written for a multidisciplinary audience.
1. See also Martin Johnson, "Did I Begin?" New Scientist, 9 December 1989, pp. 39-42. The BAAS meetings are intended to present scientific investigations and discoveries to the public. The debate, Human Embryo Research: What are the Issues?, was organized by the Ciba Foundation.

2. The early conceptus is dependent on the developmental history of the egg in the mother, which provides "a mature physical and biochemical entity within which the whole complex process" of early development operates (Johnson, "Did I Begin?" p. 40), an interaction quite distinct from the egg’s genetic contribution to the conceptus.


5. To lay person. To the embryologist, "biology does not tell us that a line should or should not be drawn" (Johnson, "Did I Begin?" p. 41). It is the job of legislation to draw the lines.


9. The fetus was entire (a homunculus), but its cord was severed, and the womb was in half-section with the placenta visibly sectioned as well. The severed cord was painted in such a way as to invite horror at the tearing away of the fetus; but the womb itself was "severed" for no other purpose it would seem than to have it provide a convenient cup for the model of the fetus. A simulated horror.


11. The shell is both procreative and procreated. The point is stimulated by two unpublished papers in which Jeffrey Clark has analyzed the remarkable iconography of Wiru pearls.


16. In the 1980s, life-world-style worlds are already passé, if one is to believe upmarket consumer experts. I refer to the concept of the personalized market here.


20. I read this off from Johnson’s presentation of the epigenetic factors. These were indicated in highly generalized terms by contrast with the specific representation of the fetus/person. No doubt his professional view is more sophisticated than the image I have derived from his talk (an organism as a free-standing entity within an environment to which it “adapts”), but for a critique of similar perceptions as they have informed the concept of culture in anthropology, see Jim Ingold, "Culture and the Perception of the Environment" (n.d.); for EIDOS workshop on Cultural Understandings of the Environment (London, 1989).


29. See Lynn M. Morgan, "When Does Life Begin? A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Personhood of Fetuses and Young Children," in Abortion Rights and Fetal Personhood, eds. Edd Doerr and James W. Prescott (Long Beach: Centerline Press, 1989). Morgan observes that in the United States it is generally thought that the neonate becomes a person with the cutting of the umbilical cord.


31. My interpretation of the sequence of statements made to de Couppe by the paramount chief Eerehau.
33. Giulia Sissa, “Subtle Bodies,” in Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part 3, p. 133. See Verena Stolcke, “New Reproductive Technologies—Same Old Fatherhood,” Critique of Anthropology 6 (1986), pp. 5–31. The term semen may be used either as the vehicle that carries sperm or as an alternative for sperm itself. It is sperm donation that is strictly at issue here.
34. Rather in the way that gifts of money in ‘Are’Are (see below) encompass, transcend, and differentiate the three components of the person (body, breath, and image) (Daniel de Coppet, “The Life-Giving Death,” in Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death, eds. S. C. Humphreys and Helen King [London: Academic Press, 1981], and “Land Owns People”), so Aristotelian semen is the vehicle for the three “principles,” soul, form, and movement (Sissa, “Subtle Bodies,” p. 136).
35. However, its alienability is a contested point. A recent study by Jeanette Edwards (personal communication) points to diverse views on men’s part about the extent to which semen is or is not felt to be disposable in the way body organs potentially are.
37. A phrase applied to interventionist medicine in general. In a world of running acronyms, it is no accident that GIPT should occur, though for a process (gamete intra-fallopian transfer) that need involve no “donation” from outside sources.
38. However, see Ray Abrahams, “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?” For Festschrift for J. A. Barnes (n.d.). Ties are occasionally established between the relatives of organ donors and the recipients. Abrahams, drawing on analogies with gift-giving, explores what is both new and old in the identities set up by organ transplant; “rival” origin remains an uninvited guest at the debate. I am grateful for permission to cite the paper.
41. See Gregory, Gifts and Commodities.
43. Battaglia, p. 191, emphasis omitted.
45. Parry arguing on this point also reinstates Mauss’s purpose in The Gift as demonstrating just how we ever came to contrast interested and disinterested gifts. “So while Mauss is generally represented as telling us how in fact the gift is never free, what I think he is really telling us is how we have acquired a theory that it should be” (Parry, “The Gift,” p. 458, emphasis omitted). I merely point here to the further coercions of choice in the consumer world of compulsory subjectivity.
46. Quoted in Stanworth, Reproductive Technologies, p. 15.
49. See de Coppet, “The Life-Giving Death,” p. 188.
52. I am compressing several arguments and contested positions here, and do not specify where the view is held. It alludes but does not do justice to Miller’s reading of consumption as symbolic labor (the consumer recontextualizes the commodity and objectifies it afresh as a source of inalienable value). See Miller, Material Culture and Mass Consumption.