

THE GIFT: TOWARD A SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

by

Gary Annable

A thesis
presented to the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Sociology

Winnipeg, Manitoba

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ISBN 0-315-37269-9

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ABSTRACT

Although gift giving is a social act par excellence, sociologists have devoted relatively little attention to its meaning and significance in modern, industrial societies like ours. Moreover, most of the existing studies tend to emphasize empirical concerns and bypass theoretical matters. For example, the essential question, "What is a gift?" remains unasked. This thesis attempts to address this and related issues.

It begins with a review and critique of the anthropological literature on gift exchange in small, pre-industrial societies. Although this body of work provides some valuable insights about the macro-sociological consequences of gift exchange, it neglects the social-psychological salience of gifts. In an effort to understand this dimension, the ideal of what is conceptualized as the 'pure' gift is examined based upon a variety of actual and fictional accounts. This discussion concludes that the anthropological formulation of gift exchange--a model that has exerted much influence on scholarly treatments of the topic--is antithetical to our conventional understanding based on the ideal of the pure gift. The thesis concludes with an attempt to reconcile these two (macrosocial and microsocial) apparently contradictory understandings of the gift.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For a project as intensely personal as this, I am indebted and grateful to numerous people who generously shared their unique gifts with me and contributed to my work and life during the time this thesis was being written. To them I owe the most desirable kind of debt, the sort one incurs gladly and repays willingly, as best as one can (see pages 57-58.)

I could not have asked for a more supportive and helpful committee of advisers: Charles David Axelrod, Nicholas Tavuchis, Larry Douglas, and Len Kaminski. Chuck supported and encouraged my work for all of the four years that I was in this program. His gift is in knowing when someone needs to be left alone to discover the potential of his faculties on his own, and when to give direction to ideas that lack it. Without his guidance and encouragement, I could not have written this thesis.

I don't think Nick Tavuchis and I exchanged a single word during the first two years of my studies. That was my loss, for I have learned much from him in the last two years. While fellow students complained about the cursory attention their advisers gave to their thesis work, Nick always gave my work the highest priority. My drafts were always read and returned promptly, often the next day. And without exception they were defaced from beginning to end with his editorial comments. These were sometimes difficult to accept, but his passion for good writing has made this a better thesis than it otherwise would have been. If for only his meticulous reading, he would deserve lavish thanks. But Nick was also a sympathetic friend, always willing to listen when things were not going well.

Larry Douglas signed on in the latter stages of this work when I couldn't complete it before Chuck left for his sabbatical in Israel. For being there when I needed him, I am grateful. Len Kaminski provided helpful comments on my proposal and final draft.

This is a relatively unusual thesis compared to most of the theses written in this department. Some members of the discipline may not see it as sociologically legitimate. I did not select samples, conduct interviews, or analyse data on a computer. And although it is theoretical in what I think is the best sense of theory, it is not a systematic set of interrelated propositions. What I did do was spend almost two years thinking, reading, observing, and writing about my gift experiences and those of others. My committee approved, and allowed me to do this, and I am sure that they will continue to nurture thesis ideas that otherwise would not be attempted. I am most indebted to them for the freedom they allowed me, and the faith they had in my ability to make good use of that freedom.

Several friends provided support and companionship during this work. Tracey Lewis and I shared an office our final year (and a bit) in the program. She knew exactly when and how to reassure me when I became discouraged, how to subtly shame me back to work when I was lazy, and when to just leave me alone. Although I'm sure she also benefitted from the time we spent together in Room 319F of the Isbister Building, I am grateful to her for the daily encouragement she provided just by being there. And also for her chocolate puffed-wheat cake, although she didn't make it nearly often enough.

Dino Altieri has been a significant influence on the direction my work has taken in the last several years; whether he wants to be responsible for that is doubtful. Heather Milne tolerated far more of my (usually) good-natured abuse than she should have. Patricia Cormack read and provided valuable suggestions on an early draft.

A student could not ask for finer role models, both as students and as human beings. Whatever paths in life they choose, I am sure they will excell.

Numerous others made my time here more pleasant and memorable. It seems insufficient to merely list their names, but they deserve mention, however cursory: Beth Jackson, Peter Ward, Zak Zimmer, Mark Badger, and Rod Kueneman.

Thanks also to two of my undergraduate teachers at Brandon University: Damir Mirkovic, who introduced me to Georg Simmel, and Milagros Ranoa, who saw (and made me see) my potential when I didn't.

And finally, thanks to my family. Nobody in my family circle has ever attended university, never mind graduate school, so they don't have any prior experience to draw on to understand me. But they try. They still aren't quite sure why someone would want to do this, but they don't bother me about it too much. Some of my most memorable gift experiences are with them, and for that 'data' I am most grateful.

None of these people are saints; truth is, some of them are downright insufferable at times. But there is something saintly about each of them. They have shared their gifts with me; I hope I have given something in return. Let this be the first installment on the debt I owe them.

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding."

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INTRODUCTION

I

The gift is one of the more remarkable features of our day-to-day social existence in Western industrial societies. Virtually all of our possessions are obtained through impersonal commodity relations guided by rationality and the maximization of utility. But when we give and receive gifts, we detach ourselves from the impersonal commerce of our daily lives. The concept "gift" delineates a discursive realm removed from commodity relations.¹ Commodity relations tell us that there is ultimately nothing between us (buyer and seller) but the commodities themselves, a truth which is embodied in the term "commodity relations" itself, i.e. relations of commodities as distinct from relations of persons. By contrast, gifts tell us that there is indeed something between us (giver and receiver), something very significant and valued; the objects given as gifts themselves are secondary to this communication of

¹ Since most objects that are given as gifts are obtained through commodity relations, rather than handmade by the giver, gifts cannot be properly spoken of as being completely detached from the realm of commerce. But, in isolation from the source of the object given as a gift, the acts of giving and receiving gifts are most certainly of a different character than impersonal commodity relations.

significance, i.e. the social substance they reflect.² Gifts tend to foster continuing social relations whereas purely economic exchanges do not.³ The gift relationship really only begins at the point where an identical relationship of commodity exchange would terminate-- at the moment of exchange or transfer. Gifts tend to engender feelings of gratitude and obligation which are, in turn, expressed in sustained social relations.

II

In the broadest sense of the word, we think of a gift as something that comes to us other than through our own efforts. Instead, it comes from without; it is bestowed upon us. There is something about acquiring something as a gift that has the potential to render the thing much

² Let me anticipate a likely criticism. The reader may object that this does not hold true for all gifts, the notable exception being practical gifts, such as home appliances given by parents to a newlywed couple. This objection is entirely appropriate at this point, but only because the boundaries of the concept "gift" have not yet been delineated. I am most concerned with the meaning and nature of symbolic gifts meant to communicate significance rather than gifts of aid or assistance whose symbolic character is secondary to the practical utility of the gift object. As the category "gift" becomes more clearly defined, offerings of practical assistance will be shown to be, at best, quasi-gifts, because the presence of need introduces considerations of charity. I will pursue the distinction between gift and charity (categories which I prefer to symbolic and practical gifts) in more detail later. For a discussion of symbolic and practical gifts, see David Cheal, The Gift Economy, (report submitted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1984), pp. 415-416.

³ An exception: contracts specify continuing social relations.

different than if it had been acquired through one's own efforts. In the most remarkable cases there is a sense of great privilege, of receiving something that is not due or deserved. This definition encompasses the broadest range of human experiences that we speak of as gifts. These include the concrete and tangible gifts that first come to mind, as well as the intangible or metaphoric sorts of gifts that do not involve the transfer of something material, but where there is a sense of "something" being bestowed from without nonetheless. Examples of this metaphoric usage of "gift" include gifts of inspiration, forgiveness, or talent. The term "gifted children" also suggests this meaning. We can also speak of a beautiful day as a gift (beauty being out of the ordinary, not due), as well as anything pleasant and unexpected (shade or rain on a hot day, relief from pain, etc.). In these non-material gifts there is sometimes an identifiable giver (as in a gift of forgiveness), but at other times there is not. But even in the latter case, there seems to be an unstated but implicit giver: God, Nature, or some other extra-human power.

In the narrower sense of material gifts (with which this thesis will be most concerned), the concept's properties are defined more specifically. Here the additional consideration is the giver's motive in giving. For an offering to be defined as a gift, it must be given freely; there must not be strings attached. The recipient of the

object is not expected by the giver (or obligated by normative demands) to give something in return.

It is true that something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were made an explicit condition of the exchange, it wouldn't be a gift.⁴

This property clearly delineates the unique conceptual territory that the gift occupies. It distinguishes the gift from other sorts of transactions where something is given--such as swapping, barter, loan, and bribery--but for which there is an explicit expectation of some return, either at the same moment the object is given (barter and swapping) or at some future time (loan and bribery).⁵

IV

In a sense we are all experts on the social psychological dynamics of the gift. From the first time we offer something we have to another when we are children, we are intimately aware of the joys and anxieties of giving and receiving gifts.

From his earliest years, the child shows his joy in giving. He gives what he is able to, a smile, a look, a kiss. As soon as his hand can seize an object, a toy, he holds it out and offers it. Now

⁴ Lewis Hyde, The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 4.

⁵ The distinction between a gift and a bribe varies in different cultures. For two interesting discussions of these differences see, Raymond Firth, Themes in Economic Anthropology, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967), pp. 16-17; and R.P. Dore, City Life in Japan, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), pp. 261-262. For a theoretical discussion of the distinction, see John T. Noonan, Jr., Bribes, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 695-698.

he may well withhold it from another child, one who would keep it jealously to himself. But he will give most generously to anyone who will get into the game of reciprocal giving.⁶

As we grow we continue to experience the pleasure of receiving gifts and having our gifts accepted by those to whom we offer them. We also learn that there are few things more painful than to be neglected when others, such as siblings, receive gifts, or when an expected gift is not received. To cite a common example, when a husband forgets to buy his wife an anniversary gift, she may fear that his love is waning. It is also painful to have one's gift refused by the person one has chosen to bestow it upon. In rejecting the gift, the person also rejects the way that the giver is symbolically defining the nature of the relationship between the two. The gift rejected betrays differing perceptions of the level of intimacy that exists between the giver and receiver, as illustrated in this account:

I dated a woman for a while--a literary type, well read, lots of books in her place--whom I admired a bit too extravagantly, and one Christmas I decided to give her something unusually nice and, I'm afraid, unusually expensive. I bought her a set of Swift's Works --not just any set but a scarce

⁶ Paul Tournier, The Meaning of Gifts, trans. by John S. Gilmour, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 42. For brief discussions of giving and receiving in young children, see Susan Issacs, Social Development in Young Children, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1933), pp. 270-279; Jean Jacques Rousseau, Emile, trans. by Barbara Foxley, (London: Everyman's Library, 1963), pp. 67-68; and Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. by Gayatri Chakravortky Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 204.

early-eighteenth-century edition; then I wrapped each leather bound volume separately and made a card for each volume, each card containing a carefully chosen quotation from Swift himself. I thought it was terribly romantic; I had visions of her opening the set, volume by volume, while we sat by the fire Christmas Eve sipping cognac and listening to the Brandenburg Concertos.

How stupid I am sometimes! She, practical woman that I should have known she was, had bought me two pairs of socks and a shirt, plus a small volume of poems by A.R. Ammons. She cried when she opened the Swift. I thought they were tears of joy, but they weren't. "I can't accept this," she said. "It's totally out of proportion." She insisted that I take the books back or sell them or keep them for myself. When I protested she just got more upset, and finally she asked me to leave and to take the books with me. Hurt and perplexed, I did. We stopped seeing each other soon after that.⁷

We also learn that gifts can be less than pleasureable experiences. From the first confusing occasion that we are instructed to feign pleasure at a poorly chosen or otherwise inappropriate gift, we realize that the etiquette of gifts can be burdensome. The act of feigning pleasure and gratitude is just one of the many situations where "etiquette prescribes that approval be simulated in disregard to actual opinions."⁸ When we give gifts, we carefully observe the recipients' reactions to determine whether or not they are pleased with what we have chosen to bestow upon them. But because of this norm of feigning approval, the response we get (and give, when we are in the

⁷ Anthony Brandt, "The Gift of Gift-Giving," Esquire, 100 (November 1983), p. 24.

⁸ Peter Blau, Exchange and Power in Social Life, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964), p. 17.

role of recipient) is sometimes unreliable as an indicator of the recipient's true feelings about the gift. The more socially perceptive giver, therefore, looks for other, more accurate signs of the recipient's evaluation of the gift.

The giver, realizing that social obligation may cause the receiver to feign pleasure in the gift, looks for whatever relevant cues are available to determine how the receiver felt about the gift. Thus, the receiver's reaction to the gift will be carefully observed by the giver. The nature of the gift will dictate what additional cues will be used. For example, can the product be immediately consumed (such as candy) or must it be conspicuously displayed or worn (such as a picture, vase or clothing).⁹

This search for indirect signs of the recipient's evaluation of a gift can continue long after the gift is given and thanks expressed.

The classic example of this is the display of disliked gifts put out just before arrival of out-of-town parents or relatives, who are sure to look for the display of these articles. The items are then removed again as soon as the visitors drive off.¹⁰

IV

I have tried to convey something of the sociological relevance of the gift in these first few pages. If these examples seem sketchy and underdeveloped, it is because they are meant merely to provide a general introduction to the sociological relevance of the gift, rather than a more

⁹ Sharon Banks, "Gift-Giving: A Review and Interactive Paradigm," Advances In Consumer Research, 6 (1979), p. 323.

¹⁰ Idem.

specific introduction to the aspects of the gift that I will emphasize in what follows. Let me end this introductory discussion with a few words about the focus of this thesis.

This is not a comprehensive study of every facet and nuance of the gift. The section of the bibliography titled "Secondary References" attests to the many works and ideas from various disciplines and perspectives that I have been unable to incorporate into this thesis. Nevertheless, I have attempted to approach the gift from several different perspectives, which are necessary if we are concerned with understanding the gift on more than one level. To this end, I have incorporated ideas from anthropology, philosophy, psychology, consumer research, etiquette, literature, literary criticism, and law. What I have set out to do is examine the conceptual underpinnings of the gift in large industrial societies like ours. To me, this is the first necessary step towards a comprehensive sociological understanding of the gift. The handful of existing sociological studies on this subject tend to emphasize empirical concerns and provide only perfunctory remarks concerning theoretical matters. Initial encounters with these studies during my preliminary research disappointed me. After reading these reports of studies that considerable time and effort must have been devoted to, I knew nothing more about the gift than I did before. The question that I thought to be most fundamental--"What is a

gift?"--seemed to be entirely irrelevant to the concerns of these researchers. For them, there seemed to be no question about the meaning of the concept, no ambiguity at all in its meaning. The tensions and contradictions that I sensed in the idea of the gift were hardly hinted at.

Although my thesis was already taking shape at this point, its focus was sharpened as I exhausted the existing sociological literature on the gift. The question that kept arising and stimulating my curiosity was this: How does an ideal of generosity and free/pure giving coexist with a norm of reciprocity? All that follows is my attempt to address that question.

GIFT AS EXCHANGE: ANTHROPOLOGY

I

Despite the obvious social-psychological richness of the gift, sociologists have paid relatively scant attention to its nature and significance in societies like ours. David Cheal suggests that research agendas in sociology tend to be shaped by moral and political concerns with what are perceived to be the problems of the day. So although gift giving seems to be a fertile topic for sociological examination, it is not problematic to society, and has therefore been overlooked.¹¹ Comprehensive studies of secrets, lies, and bribes--social acts of the same character as the gift--have been undertaken and published.¹² What distinguishes these social acts from the gift is their relationship to ethical and political concerns in our society about truth and falsehood, deception, and manipulation. For example, these acts are fundamental issues in the recent United States Congressional hearings on the Iran-Contra affair and in the past with Watergate.

¹¹ Cheal, op. cit., p. 101.

¹² Sissela Bok, Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); John T. Noonan, Jr., Bribes, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1984).

The predominant social scientific understanding of the gift has its origins in anthropology. Since the turn of the century, anthropologists have studied how goods are exchanged as reciprocal gifts in small, non-industrialized societies that lack well-developed market economies and sophisticated money systems. In these societies, gifts are so crucial to economic and social relations that their economies are essentially gift economies. Gifts are clearly more important to these societies than they are in our own. In large industrial societies, gifts are most relevant on the interpersonal and small group levels; but in small, non-industrial societies they are crucial to the maintenance of social ties on a much broader, societal scale. As a result, the study of gift giving in small, non-industrial societies has enjoyed a "theoretically privileged position" in anthropology.¹³

Two geographical areas have been the main focus of anthropological studies of gift exchange: the islands most commonly referred to as Melanesia off the northern and eastern coasts of Australia--the largest of which is Papua-New Guinea--and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the northwest coast of North America. The Kula of the Trobriand Islanders who inhabit the former and the potlatch of the native Indians who inhabit the latter should be of at least passing familiarity to most sociologists; like the basic

¹³ Cheal, op. cit., p. 102. See also, Lewis Hyde, op. cit., pp. xv-xvi.

concepts of psychology (e.g. the id, ego, and super-ego), and sociology (e.g. group, role, status, alienation), these systems of gift exchange are part of the shared discourse of the social sciences.

The conception of the gift that emerges from anthropology is a distinctively social structural one; the emphasis is on societal systems of gift exchange (gift economies) rather than on the act of the gift itself. This macrosociological emphasis is attributable to the influence of Durkheimian functionalism on early 20th Century anthropology.

II

Our conventional understanding of the gift is of a transfer of property without expectation of return.¹⁴ Although many of our gifts implicitly or explicitly carry some expectation of reciprocity, this ideal of free giving animates commonplace definitions of a gift. Gifts that approximate this ideal are typically invested with greater meaning and significance than those that do not.

Everyday observation and historical observation alike reveal innumerable and effective forms of giving oneself and reveal that the gift is apprehended by the collective mentality as a category irreducible to mercantile exchange, and more respected and honoured the more exempt it is from egocentric motives. Philosophies, religions, literatures bear witness to it: although there may never have been a single act of perfectly pure

¹⁴ This sense is embodied in legal definitions of the gift, such as "a gratuitous grant or transfer of property." Roger Bird, Osborn's Concise Law Dictionary, 7th edition, (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1983), p. 158.

giving under heaven, yet it is certain that men have formed and venerated the idea, and that this idea has resounded in individual minds and in group representations.¹⁵

Further, lack of expectation of return is what distinguishes the gift from other sorts of transactions such as loans, barter, and swapping. Conceived of in this way, the gift is essentially a one-way transaction, a gratuitous bestowal. Of course, the social relations involved are not necessarily uni-directional; but the transaction is unilateral in terms of material goods. The approach elaborated by Marcel Mauss and most anthropologists inspired by his work conceives of the gift in a different way. It sees the gift not as a gratuitous bestowal from one to another, but as a two-way reciprocal transaction, i.e., an exchange defined as a fundamentally economic phenomenon.¹⁶

¹⁵ Francois Perroux, "The Gift": Its Economic Meaning in Contemporary Capitalism," Diogenes, 6 (1954), p. 14.

¹⁶ The reader should be warned that I am using the word 'economic' in its broad sense. In ordinary usage the word is concerned with the sphere of human material needs, specifically the production, distribution, and consumption of the goods and services required to satisfy those needs. I am using it in the sense of a system in general, to refer to a system of interaction, rather than narrowly as a system of material goods.

Mauss's formulation of gift exchange is normally interpreted as being distinctively non- economic, in that he emphasizes the social relations of gift exchange rather than the traffic of material goods associated with those social relations. So, in the most common sense of the word 'economic,' Mauss's theory is non-economic. But in the broad sense I am using here, it is definitely economic: gift exchange is seen as operating on an economy of give and take, credit and debt, etc.

Prior to Mauss's The Gift (published in 1925, English translation 1954), scholarly studies of "primitive" societies concluded that the gift-giving practices of these peoples were qualitatively different from those of "advanced" cultures. The author of the entry on "Gifts (Primitive and Savage)" in an early twentieth century British encyclopedia of religion and ethics had this to say about the gift giving practices of small, non-industrial societies:

It has been commonly assumed that the 'presents' of savages and barbarians are the outcome of the same feelings and intentions as those of the modern man. Our act in giving is (in theory, in all events) an act of spontaneous bounty without thought of a return. It springs from good-will, or generosity, or gratitude, or sympathy. But with the primitive man it is otherwise, and of him we may say generally what has been said of the western Eskimos, that of a free and disinterested gift he is absolutely ignorant.¹⁷

Despite the parenthetical qualifier ("in theory, in all events") in the description of the motives that inspire gift-giving in modern societies (read: Great Britain and Europe), the respective characteristics of gift-giving in primitive and advanced societies are drawn quite explicitly: the civilized (read: British and European) man has reached a higher stage of moral development than the primitive. He gives generously and without expecting return while the savage man remains a slave to his own self-interest.

¹⁷ P.J. Hamilton-Grierson, "Gifts (Primitive and Savage)," in James Hastings, ed., Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 6, (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1913), p. 197.

In The Gift, Mauss portrays the "primitive's" conception of the gift in much the same way, but dispenses with the moralistic comparison to modern man's conception. Instead, he argues that all gifts, whether in Papua-New Guinea or London, England, are motivated by concerns other than selfless generosity. "We contend that the same morality and economy [at work in primitive societies] are at work, albeit less noticeably, in our own societies, and we believe that in them we have discovered one of the bases of social life."¹⁸

The central argument of The Gift is that regardless of how freely and spontaneously a gift seems to be offered, or how vigorously the giver insists that no return is expected, or how unsolicited the gift is by the receiver, the very fact of its presentation imposes an obligation of some return. In the introductory chapter, Mauss writes:

We intend in this book to isolate one important set of phenomena: namely, prestations¹⁹ which are in theory voluntary, disinterested, and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behaviour is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest. (Mauss: 1)

¹⁸ Marcel Mauss, The Gift, translated by Ian Cunnison, (London: Cohen & West, 1954). p. 2. Further references to this book will be indicated in the text by the author and page number.

¹⁹ In his translator's note to The Gift, Ian Cunnison writes "There is no convenient English word to translate the French prestation so this word itself is used to mean any thing or series of things given freely or obligatorily as a gift or in exchange."

Mauss identifies three obligations that are essential to gift exchange: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to make a return. Obviously, the first obligation is the original requirement not only for all exchange, but for all social interaction as well. Think of the token ritual offerings we make to strangers and friends when we initiate interaction, such as a cup of coffee, a drink, a cigarette, or food. In a broader sense, initiating interaction always requires the giving and revealing of oneself in some way. The obligation to receive is also essential to exchange and interaction. To refuse to give or to receive is tantamount to refusing social relations. In our society, such a refusal is "a refusal of friendship and intercourse"; but in small traditional societies, it may be "the equivalent of a declaration of war" (Mauss: 11). The obligation to return completes and renews the cycle.

In the pre-literate cultures studied by Mauss and his intellectual heirs, the imperative to make a return offering for a gift received is rigidly defined. The rigidity of this imperative is a manifestation of the importance of gifts and counter-gifts to the exchange and distribution of goods in these societies²⁰ --goods that are actually

²⁰ Of the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski writes that "most if not all economic acts are found to belong to some chain of reciprocal gifts and counter-gifts." Crime and Custom in Savage Society, (London: Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 40. Of complex industrial societies, Levi-Strauss writes: "the proportion of goods transferred according to these

exchanged as gifts and other exchanges that are facilitated by the goodwill fostered by ceremonial gift exchanges. Additionally, highest prestige in these societies is usually accorded to those who give, rather than accumulate, the greatest wealth. The most obvious consequence of this orientation is that it ensures appropriate reciprocation. But it also tends to encourage escalating returns because one who receives a gift from another is placed in a socially inferior and deferential position.²¹ Making a return offering that is merely equivalent to the gift received balances the relationship. But if the recipient of the first gift wishes to enhance his prestige, he must make a return in excess of the gift he has received. For the Malekula, the inhabitants of the New Hebrides islands off the east coast of Australia, "to make a return equal in value to the initial gift is sufficient to avoid disgrace; but if a man desires to be well spoken of he must give as

archaic modalities is very small in comparison with those involved in commerce and merchandising. Reciprocal gifts are diverting survivals which engage the curiosity of the antiquarian." Claude Levi-Strauss, The Elementary Structures of Kinship, translated by Bell et. al., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 61.

²¹ Peter Farb has shown that this is keenly felt in Eskimo culture, noting the phrase "With gifts you make slaves just as with whips you make dogs." Peter Farb, Man's Rise to Civilization: The Cultural Ascent of the Indians of North America, revised second edition, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 45. "Gifts have to be repaid. They constitute a debt, and until discharged, the relationship of the individuals involved is in a state of imbalance. The debtor has to act circumspectly towards those who have this advantage over him or otherwise risk ridicule." K.E. Read, "Leadership and Consensus in a New Guinea Society," American Anthropologist, 61 (June, 1959), 429.

repayment something of greater value than that which he received in the first place."²² The most extreme example of this escalation of returns is the Kwakiutl Indian potlatch where different tribes once competed to destroy the greatest quantity of wealth to demonstrate superior riches, power, and generosity. Property destroyed was essentially a gift that could not possibly be refused. "Nowhere else is the prestige of an individual as closely bound up with expenditure, and with the duty of returning with interest gifts received . . . The rich man who shows his wealth by spending recklessly is the man who wins prestige" (Mauss: 35).

In these cultures very little is freely given. Even when the giver insists that a proffered gift requires no return, the one who accepts it will soon hear uncomplimentary comments and be the object of other sorts of social pressure if he does not make an appropriate return offering within a reasonable period of time.²³ For the Malekula a gift is "a

²² A. Bernard Deacon, Malekula, A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides, (London, 1934), pp. 199-202. Cited in Melville Herskovits, Economic Anthropology, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), pp. 160-161.

²³ Malinowski, Crime and Custom in Savage Society, p. 41. David Cheal argues that the rules of gift exchange in modern societies are less stringent than in these societies. "Although a great deal of importance is attached to the etiquette of giving, the social controls on those who break the rules are minimal. Those who have been offended against are less likely to make an issue of the offence than they are to ignore it entirely, or to inform the offender of the infraction and to 'let it go at that.' The main concern of individuals involved in a relationship is to keep the interaction going, not to

venture, a hopeful speculation."²⁴ Edwin Denig, a 19th century American fur trader and amateur ethnographer, gives this description/interpretation of gift-giving among the Indian tribes that inhabited the Upper Missouri.

An Indian never gives away anything without an expectation of a return or some other interested motive. If one observes another in possession of a fine horse he would like to have he will take the occasion of some feast or dance and publicly present him with a gun or something of value, flattering his bravery, praising his liberality, and throwing out several hints as to his object, though not directly mentioning it. He will let the matter rest thus for some days and if the other does not present him with the horse will demand his gift returned, which is done.²⁵

Among the Yir-Yoront of Australia, a man who is known to possess tobacco will be sent 'gifts' from distant relatives whom he rarely sees. These 'gifts' are essentially serving notice that a return of tobacco is expected.²⁶ In The Mountain People, Colin Turnbull writes that a similar practice is found amongst the Ik of Uganda. Here the object of giving gifts (typically of assistance rather than material goods) is to build up obligations that may be recalled in times of crisis (typically arising from the

enforce the rules." op. cit., p. 415.

²⁴ Deacon, cited in Herskovits, op. cit., p. 161.

²⁵ Edwin Denig, Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri, 46th Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, (Washington, 1930), pp. 510-511. Cited in Herskovits, op. cit., p. 168.

²⁶ Lauriston Sharp, "Ritual Life and Economics of the Yir-Yoront of Cape York Peninsula," Oceania, Vol. 5, 1934, pp. 37-38.

frequent droughts in this part of the world). The Ik go to great lengths to provide assistance to others. Because an offer of assistance that is refused does not build up any obligation, the Ik will often provide assistance to another without the formality of offering it. In this way, the assistance cannot be refused, and the one who grants the favour is sure of accruing credit for a future request for assistance. Accruing credit is so important to survival in the difficult conditions found in this part of Africa that the offers of assistance often become tragically comic. An offering of assistance

. . . that can be rejected is useless, and so you have the odd phenomenon of these otherwise singularly self-interested people going out of their way to 'help' each other. In point of fact they are helping themselves, and their help may very well be resented in the extreme, but it is done in such a way that it cannot be refused, for it has already been given. Someone, quite unasked, may hoe another's field in his absence, or rebuild his stockade, or join in the building of a house that could easily be done by the man and his wife alone. At one time I have seen so many men thatching a roof that the whole roof was in serious danger of collapsing, and the protests of the owner were of no avail. The work done was a debt incurred.²⁷

²⁷ Colin Turnbull, The Mountain People, (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1972), p.146. Korn and McCorkle provide a similar example within prisons. "Once an inmate has accepted any material symbol of service it is understood that the donor of these gifts has thereby established personal rights over the receiver. The extreme degree to which these mutual aid usages have been made dependent to power struggles is illustrated by the custom of forcing other inmates to accept cigarettes, a frequent prison invitation to submission. Aggressive inmates will go to extraordinary lengths to place gifts in the cells of inmates they have selected for personal domination. These intended victims, in order to escape the threatened bondage, must find the owner and insist that the gifts be

These are the kinds of examples that lead Mauss to conclude that the pure gift--the disinterested act of generosity without expectation of return--is rarely, if ever, found in these societies. Rather, gifts are given out of obligation (to reciprocate previous offerings, or in conformity to role demands) and out of self-interest (to obligate others and to enhance one's prestige).

Sociologically, the principle consequence of the three obligations Mauss outlines is integrative. Strangers or acquaintances meet, goods are exchanged, alliances are formed, assistance is rendered, families and groups become bound by intermarriage, etc. Peter Blau, whose exchange theory is the sociological legacy of Mauss's work, sums up the sociological effect of gift exchange when he writes "reciprocal benefactions create social bonds among peers."²⁸

taken back." Lloyd W. McCorkle and Richard Korn, "Resocialization Within Walls," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 293, (1954), p. 90.

²⁸ Peter Blau, op. cit., p. 8.

THE IDEAL OF THE GIFT: THE MORALITY OF GIVING

I

Although there is much insight to be gleaned from this anthropological understanding of the gift--most notably the gift's power to bind individuals and groups together--it is limited in how comprehensively it captures the gift as a human experience. With its emphasis on the social structure of gift exchange, it gives short shrift to the way that individuals subjectively experience gifts. For example, the anthropological understanding of the gift is curiously alien to the ideal of the gift that exists in our society and also likely exists, in some form, in the societies that anthropologists study. According to anthropologists, this ideal does not manifest itself empirically; it is an ideology that obscures the reality of self-interested exchange. Some of these anthropologists may acknowledge that the ideal of the free and generous gift is a beautiful lie, but that it is no less a lie because of its beauty. Of course, it is not unusual for the sociological (or anthropological) understanding of a phenomenon to be at odds with the common sense or taken-for-granted understanding of the same phenomenon. One of the essential features of sociological consciousness is a desire to explore beyond our

everyday assumptions to the underlying structures of interaction and society.²⁹ But, in doing so, we must not forget that ideals are forces in human history and society, as are other mental phenomena such as dreams and emotions. An understanding of the gift that dismisses the ideal of the gift as "pretence and social deception" (Mauss, The Gift: 1) does us a disservice because it distorts the reality of gift giving in modern societies. In taking the partial understanding to be the whole, it ignores contexts that belie its guiding assumption. At the very least, we must remember--as we seek to penetrate beyond ideology to empirical reality--that the ideology itself is also an empirical reality (in that the ideal of the gift is a social product and exists in the consciousnesses of those who engage in the giving and receiving of gifts), and worthy of more thorough examination than Mauss and his inheritors provide.³⁰

But the position I will take here goes a step beyond this criticism. I intend to question the assumption that our conventional understanding of the gift (the ideal of the "pure" gift) is merely the ideology that cloaks the empirical "reality" of the gift as Mauss formulates it (that

²⁹ Peter Berger, Invitation to Sociology, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1963).

³⁰ For the intellectual roots of this neglect of lay definitions of a concept under scientific examination, see Emile Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method, (New York: The Free Press, 1964), pp. 22, 32-38.

nothing is given without an expectation of some return). There is no doubt that much of our behaviour is ardently self-interested, and that many of our gifts carry expectations of returns. But there is equally convincing evidence that humans are also capable of a generosity that cannot be reduced to, or simply explained as the result of, underlying self-interest. A conception of human action that vigorously distrusts explicit motives and finds self-interest lurking behind every act of "apparent" kindness or generosity seems founded on an overly cynical and simplistic reading of Freudian psychology. "Look closely enough at generous, kind, or altruistic behaviour," anthropology seems to be telling us, "and you will find the motive of self-interest." Not only does this approach relegate our conventional understanding of the gift to the status of mere pretence and deception, but it also denies the authenticity of all action that purports to serve the interests of another and not the actor.³¹

It is not my intention to empirically demonstrate that completely selfless behaviour exists. I doubt very much that this problem could be formulated as a scientifically

³¹ The assumption of reciprocity is "so entrenched in certain contemporary anthropological and sociological circles that a form of tautological reasoning is not uncommon that effectively precludes even the possibility of any other description of social interaction. As a result it has frequently seemed to exchange theorists that beneath the apparent selflessness of assistance to others lies a covert hope for some future benefit." David Cheal, *op. cit.*, p. 108. See also pp. 504-505.

testable hypothesis without making a mockery of the complexity of human experience.³² But I think that concluding that sincerely generous behaviour does not or cannot exist merely because we haven't empirically established that it does exist, is a serious mistake. Having little or no reason to believe something is not the same as having a reason to doubt it.³³ I think that a wiser and more fruitful approach to examining human behaviour would be one that accepts the possibility that sincerely selfless behaviour may be possible, and that acts of great generosity and kindness may not always be inspired by concerns of some return benefit. The ideal of the pure gift animates our experience of giving and receiving gifts. A study of the gift that fails to seriously examine this ideal and its implications would be incomplete and impoverished.

II

We know from our own experiences that gifts can take a wide variety of forms and convey an unusually broad range of meanings--perhaps as broad and varied as any single human act. Gifts can be voluntary or obligatory, spontaneous or calculated, practical or symbolic, material or intangible

³² The father of scientific sociology himself acknowledges the difficulties of studying this sort of human experience when he writes that "human volition is the most complex of all phenomena." Emile Durkheim, Suicide, trans. by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, (New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 148.

³³ Vicki Hearne, Adam's Task: Calling Animals By Name, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), pp. 12, 98-100.

(e.g. a gift of inspiration, a gift of forgiveness). Gifts may be offered as spontaneous expressions of love, to expiate guilt, to repay favours, or in response to normative demands and role obligations, i.e. occasions that require the giving of gifts, such as birthdays, Christmas, and Mother's Day. Gifts can be manipulative. They can produce an oppressive burden of obligation. They can express domination by establishing and maintaining hierarchical relationships. And, as we all know, gifts can be banal and uninspired, acts that have lost their significance through ritualization. Often, these are the sorts of meanings that gifts do express. But a gift can also be magical and transformative, transcending the banality and manipulation that characterize many of the former sort. Paul Tournier writes that most humans live "in a vague and more or less conscious hope of someday receiving something for which we never dared ask, some regal gift symbolized so well in our fairy tales."³⁴ Ultimately, this is the kind of gift I am most concerned with: the wondrous and transformative gift, the gift that moves us deeply and touches our soul, not primarily for its content but for the fact that someone has divined our deepest desires and deemed us worthy of the gift's bestowal. This is the gift that awakens or reawakens us in some way, to the other, to ourselves, or (to speak metaphysically for a moment) to the privilege of being alive

³⁴ Paul Tournier, The Meaning of Gifts, (New York: Pillar Books, 1976), p. 12.

and to the interdependence of all living things. Consider some illustrative examples:

One of the central scenes of Out of Africa, the movie about the life of the Danish writer Karen Blixen, whose nom de plume was Isak Dinesen, concerns a gift of this sort. Very early in her life, Karen (played by Meryl Streep) develops a keen talent for oral storytelling. But she does not regard this talent as something worth pursuing as a vocation. "[She] never intended to be a writer. She always felt that she was meant for something else entirely, and the seventeen years immediately preceding her first serious literary efforts were spent running a coffee plantation in Kenya."³⁵ In her mid-thirties, Karen meets and falls in love with Denys Finch-Hatton (played by Robert Redford). Shortly after their first meeting, Denys spends an evening with Karen and her then-husband, listening to her tell stories into the middle of the night. As he is departing the next morning, Denys gives Karen a gold pen from his saddlebag. This symbolic and pivotal gift inspires Karen to put her storytelling talents to more directed use, i.e. to become a writer.³⁶

³⁵ Thomas R. Whissen, Isak Dinesen's Aesthetics, (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1973), p. 6.

³⁶ This incident appears to be a product of the scriptwriter's imagination rather than an actual incident in Dinesen's biography. Although Finch-Hatton had an undeniable influence on Dinesen as a mentor and critic, I have not been able to find mention of a gift of a pen in any of the books upon which the screenplay is based.

In his memoirs, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda tells a story of a childhood exchange of gifts that also exemplifies the sort of gift I am speaking of. One day while playing in the yard behind his house, the young Neruda discovered a hole in one of the fence boards. He looked through the hole and saw a patch of land "just like ours, untended and wild. I drew back a few steps, because I had a vague feeling that something was about to happen." Suddenly a hand appeared in the hole from the other side of the fence, the tiny hand of a boy about the same age as Neruda. As he moved closer, the tiny hand disappeared and in its place remained a small toy sheep. Although the sheep's wool was faded and the "wheels on which it had glided were gone, I had never seen such a lovely sheep." He looked back through the hole, but the boy had disappeared. Neruda went back into his house and brought out something to offer the mysterious boy. He placed "a pine cone, partly open, fragrant and resinous, and very precious to me," in the place where the other boy had left the toy sheep. "I never saw the boy's hand again. I have never again seen a little sheep like that one. I lost it in a fire. And even today, when I go past a toyshop, I look in the windows furtively. But it's no use. A sheep like that one was never made again."³⁷

³⁷ All direct quotations are from Pablo Neruda, Memoirs, translated by Hardie St. Martin, (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1977), p. 12.

Neruda has speculated about the significance of this incident to his poetry. In an interview he commented that

This exchange of gifts--mysterious--settled deep inside me like a sedimentary deposit. . . I have been a lucky man. To feel the intimacy of brothers is a marvellous thing in life. To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life. But to feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses--that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being, and unites all living things.

That exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea: that all humanity is somehow together. . . It won't surprise you then that I have attempted to give something resinous, earthlike, and fragrant [his poetry] in exchange for human brotherhood. . .

This is the great lesson I learned in my childhood, in the backyard of a lonely house. Maybe it was nothing but a game two boys played who didn't know each other and wanted to pass to the other some good things of life. Yet maybe this small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me also, deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light.³⁸

Not only do we long to receive this sort of soul awakening gift; we also desire to give it. To return to Paul Tournier's allusion to fairy tales, we see ourselves in both Cinderella (who receives the magical gifts from her fairy godmother) and the fairy godmother herself. We long

³⁸ Pablo Neruda, Twenty Poems, translated by James Wright and Robert Bly, (Madison, Minn.: Sixties Press, 1967), p. 110. Cited in Lewis Hyde, The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, pp. 281-282. The Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges has also spoken of the relationship of gifts to creativity. See Richard Burgin, Conversations With Jorge Luis Borges, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). pp. 71-72.

for both the acknowledgement that we are regarded as worthy of the great gift, and the heroic opportunity to transform another with our gifts. It is a precious experience to give another joy. Initiating someone to pleasures as yet unknown, however simple they may be, is perhaps more rewarding to the person responsible for the initiation than to the initiate. Parents will recognize this most acutely, for the young child is introduced to new experiences almost daily. Similarly, Denys Finch-Hatton's gift to Isak Dinesen stirred her nascent faculties and inspired her to realize her potential.

So, although anthropology provides us with insight into a certain conception of the gift, it tells us little of the aspects of the gift described in these contexts. For its specific ambitions, anthropology's formulation of gift exchange is accurate, but it is obvious that we will have to look elsewhere for some initial statements on the social psychological aspects of the gift that anthropology neglects.

III

Giving generously and without expecting reciprocation is one of the most venerated of human behaviors. Most religions encourage people to give freely and generously to those in need (charity) and to family and friends (gifts).³⁹ In the Judeo-Christian tradition this ethic is prescribed in numerous biblical passages: "It is more blessed to give than to receive," (Acts 20:35); "God loveth a cheerful giver," (2 Corinthians 9:7); "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven," (Matthew 19:21); "Freely ye have received, freely give," (Matthew 10:8).

³⁹ Although charity and gift are not mutually exclusive categories in the strictest sense, they are generally distinguishable. In charity the recipient is in need of what is given. The recipient of a gift may need what is given, but not necessarily so. Peter Blau cites an untranslated section of Soziologie where Simmel notes that "giving something useful to a poor relative or friend who needs it humiliates him, because the evident instrumental value of the gift robs it of its sentimental value, thus emphasizing that he is being treated as a needy person rather than as an intimate." Peter Blau, op. cit., p. 111fn. An additional distinguishing feature is that the recipient of charity is usually not known to the donor. "Modern social welfare has really to be thought of as help given to the stranger, not to the person who by reason of personal bond commands it without asking. It assumes a degree of social distance between helper and helped." H.L. Wilensky and C.N. Lebeaux, Industrial Society and Social Welfare, (New York: Russell Sage, 1958), p. 141. As a result, charitable donations are typically mediated by a third party, the charitable organization, which receives and allocates donations.

Folk tales also extol the virtues of gift-giving and generosity in general. This 19th century Scottish tale is titled "The Girl and the Dead Man".

Once upon a time there was an old woman and she had a leash of daughters. One day the eldest daughter said to her mother, "It is time for me to go out into the world and seek my fortune." "I shall bake a loaf of bread for you to carry with you," said the mother. When the bread came from the oven the mother asked her daughter, "Would you rather have a small piece and my blessing or a large piece and my curse?" "I would rather have the large piece and your curse," replied the daughter.

Off she went down the road and when the night came wreathing around her she sat at the foot of a wall to eat her bread. A ground quail and her twelve puppies gathered near, and the little birds of the air. "Wilt thou give us a part of thy bread," they asked. "I won't, you ugly brutes," she replied. "I haven't enough for myself." "My curse on thee," said the quail, "and the curse of my twelve birds, and thy mother's curse which is the worst of all." The girl arose and went on her way, and the piece of bread had not been half enough.

She had not travelled far before she saw a little house, and though it seemed a long way off she soon found herself before its door. She knocked and heard a voice cry out, "Who is there?" "A good maid seeking a master." "We need that," said the voice, and the door swung open.

The girl's task was to stay awake every night and watch over a dead man, the brother of the housewife, whose corpse was restless. As her reward she was to receive a peck of gold and a peck of silver. And while she stayed she was to have as many nuts as she broke, as many needles as she lost, as many thimbles as she pierced, as much thread as she used, as many candles as she burned, a bed of green silk over her and a bed of green silk under her, sleeping by day and watching by night.

On the very first night, however, she fell asleep in her chair. The housewife came in, struck her with a magic club, killed her dead, and threw her back on the pile of kitchen garbage.

Soon thereafter the middle daughter said to her mother, "It is time for me to follow my sister and seek my fortune." Her mother baked her a loaf of bread and she too chose the larger piece and her mother's curse. And what had happened to her sister happened to her.

Soon thereafter the youngest daughter said to her mother, "It is time for me to follow my sisters and seek my fortune." "I had better bake you a loaf of bread," said her mother, "and which would you rather have, a small piece and my blessing or a large piece and my curse?" "I would rather," said the daughter, "have the smaller piece and your blessing."

And so she set off down the road and when the night came wreathing in around her she sat at the foot of a wall to eat her bread. The ground quail and her twelve puppies and the little birds of the air gathered about. "Wilt thou give us some of that?" they asked. "I will, you pretty creatures, if you will keep me company." She shared her bread, all of them ate their fill, and the birds clapped their wings about her 'til she was snug with the warmth.

The next morning she saw a house a long way off . . . [here the task and the wages are repeated].

She sat up at night to watch the corpse, sewing to pass the time. About midnight the dead man sat up and screwed up a grin. "If you do not lie down properly I will give you one good leathering with a stick," she cried. He lay down. After a while he rose up on one elbow and screwed up a grin; and a third time he sat and screwed up a grin.

When he rose the third time she walloped him with the stick. The stick stuck to the dead man and her hand stuck to the stick and off they went! He dragged her through the woods, and when it was high for him it was low for her, and when it was low for him it was high for her. The nuts were knocking at their eyes and the wild plums beat at their ears until they both got through the wood. Then they returned home.

The girl was given the peck of gold, the peck of silver, and a vessel of cordial. She found her two sisters and rubbed them with the cordial and brought them back to life. And they left me sitting here, and if they were well, 'tis well; if

they were not, let them be.⁴⁰

There are four major gifts in this tale, along with several others of less significance. The first is the mother's gift of bread to each of her daughters. For the two oldest daughters--who choose large loaves and their mother's curse rather than small loaves and her blessing--this is the only gift they receive. From that point in the tale they encounter misfortune. (It is also significant that neither of the two eldest daughters give a gift). The youngest daughter--who chooses a small loaf and her mother's blessing--transforms the bread into the tale's second gift when she shares it with the birds. For her generosity she receives a number of unexpected benefits that aid in her survival. She and the birds are relieved of their hunger (even though her piece of bread was smaller than those that were not enough to relieve her sisters' hunger); the birds befriend her and warm her through the night; and she is able to remain awake through the next night and successfully perform the task of watching over the restless corpse. For this she receives the gold and silver promised to her, and the third gift, a vessel of cordial (a medicine to stimulate the heart). The cordial is not specified in the wages offered to each of the daughters. It appears to be a reward for successfully completing the task

⁴⁰ "The Girl and the Dead Man," in Popular Tales of the West Highlands, Vol. 1, ed. by John Francis Campbell, (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1890), pp. 220-225. Cited in Lewis Hyde, op. cit., pp. 5-7.

that others had not. The cordial becomes the fourth and final gift when the youngest daughter revives her sisters with it.

The veneration of generosity is also seen in the highest honours of nations that are posthumously bestowed upon those who give their lives in saving the lives of others, the purest expression of generosity possible. Jesus Christ declares "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend," (John 15:13), in one of his farewell discourses before being crucified.

The conception of the gift that develops from this ethic of generosity defines the gift as a free and generous offering. The giver expects nothing in return, neither a return gift nor deference nor enhanced prestige. This definition is formulated in the consciousness of the giver, in the integrity of the giver's motivation in giving. The giver's interest is in the pleasure and good of the receiver. The essential features of the gift conceived of in this way are that it is freely given (unfettered by obligation) and that nothing is expected in return. For example, the youngest daughter in the Scottish folk tale shared her bread with the birds even though she could not have expected even the complete loaf to satisfy her hunger. That her hunger--as well as the birds'--is relieved is entirely unexpected.⁴¹

⁴¹ The fact that she does receive benefits (her hunger is

relieved where her sisters' was not) is noted, but its significance will not be discussed until a later chapter.

RESOLUTION: THE TRUTH OF THE GIFT

I

Two conceptions of the gift have been presented here, one formulating self-interest as the essential source of the gift, the other generous interest in the good-of-the-other. Does the anthropological analysis--from which most social scientific examinations of the gift derive--convincingly deny the validity of the second? Does it convincingly rule out the possibility of the pure gift, one that is offered unfettered by obligation and indebtedness and without expectation of return? I think not. These two formulations of the gift have been presented as a conceptually discrete dichotomy: the first employs a primarily economic vocabulary while the second is framed in moral terms. But although these separate motivations to gift giving--self-interested exchange vs. pure generosity--have been formulated as analytically discrete, they rarely manifest themselves as such in actual experience. That is, both motives, in varying proportions, are likely to figure in most gifts. A gift motivated purely by self-interest, without even a token concern for the benefit of the other, possesses more of the character of a bribe than of a gift. So although something may be proffered in this way (in the guise of a gift), in

substance it is not a gift. And, the preceding chapter notwithstanding, pure gifts bereft of self-interest are likely rare occurrences.

Taken alone, each of the approaches presented here is limited in its ability to fully articulate a sociology of the gift that captures both the subjective experience and the social structural ramifications. The anthropological approach is limited because it essentially denies the possibility of the pure gift (generosity without instrumental motives). By defining self-interest broadly/vaguely enough, this approach can reduce all human behaviour to self-interested exchange, such as in the social exchange theories of Homans and Blau.⁴² "The main problem with exchange theorizing continues to be the extreme lability of the explanations offered. If some hypothesized system of reciprocities does not seem to apply in a particular case then another as-yet-unexamined potential return for a transaction can always be suggested."⁴³ Even the purest examples of gifts presented in the preceding chapter could be explained in strictly instrumental terms. The earthly generosity that the Bible prescribes could be explained as a reciprocal offering to God for the gift of

⁴² Blau, Exchange and Power In Social Life, and George Homans, Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms, (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1961.)

⁴³ Cheal, The Gift Economy, p. 111. See also Cheal, "Transactions and Transformational Models," in N. Denzin, editor, Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Vol. 5, (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1984), pp. 143-144.

one's life, or for the promise of eternal salvation. Similarly, giving one's life in saving another could conceivably be explained (given a sufficiently cynical conception of human nature that denies the possibility of genuine altruism) as an exchange for the heroic recognition accorded to those who lose their lives in performing acts of apparently selfless altruism.⁴⁴

The second approach,⁴⁵ founded on our conventional understanding of the gift, is similarly limited. In idealizing the gift, it fails to grapple with the fact that generous givers do tend to receive benefits. The paradoxical moral of many gift folk tales is that, while those who give for the returns they desire tend to encounter ill-fortune, those who give most generously and most freely receive the most in return. For example, recall the Scottish folk tale presented earlier, where the youngest daughter receives an abundance of benefits after sharing her tiny loaf of bread with the birds. What are we to make of

⁴⁴ E.g. "Generosity without hope of reciprocation is the rarest and most cherished of human behaviours, subtle and difficult to define...surrounded by ritual and circumstance, and honored by medallions and emotional orations. We sanctify true altruism in order to reward it and thus make it less than true, and by that means to promote its recurrence in others. Human altruism, in short, is riddled to its foundations with...ambivalence." Edward O. Wilson, On Human Nature, (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), p. 155.

⁴⁵ It is probably presumptuous of me to refer to this as an "approach," since it is far less systematic than the anthropological approach. This second "approach" is more accurately an attempt to fill in some of the gaps that anthropology neglects.

the paradox of the truly generous gift, the gift that elicits great returns even though it is given freely and without expectation of return? Alvin Gouldner captures this paradox eloquently when he writes

There is no gift more certain to command attention than the gift that need not have been given because of our past indebtedness, or future ambitions, or our present sense of obligation. The paradox is this: there is no gift that brings a higher return than the free gift, the gift given with no strings attached. For that which is given freely moves men deeply and makes them most indebted to their benefactors.⁴⁶

Despite the problems posed by each of these approaches, they do provide us with two useful conceptions of the gift. Each is built upon an ideal: anthropology and social exchange theory are built upon the ideal of social solidarity/integration which is a product of self-interested exchange, and our conventional understanding is built on an ideal of generosity. I think the most fruitful approach to the gift is one that allows both of these to co-exist as twin ideals.

Despite the empirical elusiveness of both of these conceptions of what a gift is, they are useful for defining the boundaries a transaction can exist within: giving for one's own benefit vs. giving for the benefit of the other. It is within these boundaries that the gift is of most empirical interest.

⁴⁶ Alvin Gouldner, "The Importance of Something For Nothing," in For Sociology, (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 277.

Aristotle and Pierre Bourdieu are two students of human social life who have noted the contradictory elements of the gift. In a discussion of friendship, Aristotle suggests the relationship of these two considerations in giving gifts.

The moral type [of exchange]. . . is not based on stated terms, but the gift or other service is given as to a friend, although the giver expects to receive an equivalent or greater return as though it had not been a free gift but a loan; and as he ends the relationship in a different spirit from that in which he began it, he will complain. The reason of this is that all men, or most men, wish what is noble but choose what is profitable and while it is noble to render a service not with an eye to receiving one in return, it is profitable to receive one. One ought, therefore, if one can, to return the equivalent of services rendered, and to do so willingly; for one ought not to make a man one's friend if one is unwilling to return his favours.⁴⁷

Pierre Bourdieu also recognizes the contradictions inherent in the gift and has suggested an approach that acknowledges the validity of both of the formulations that I have outlined here. He sees the "institutionally organized and guaranteed misrecognition" of the primacy of self-interest in human affairs as the essential condition of the gift.⁴⁸ This misrecognition of the primacy of self-interest is made possible, according to Bourdieu, by the temporal structure of gift exchange--the lapse of time

⁴⁷ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, translated by H. Rackham, (London: Heinemann Ltd., 1962), pp. 507-509.

⁴⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, translated by Richard Nice, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 171. Further references to this book will be indicated in the text by the author's name and the page number.

between a gift and a return offering. One of the universal rules of gift exchange is that the return gift must be deferred and different if it is not to constitute an insult.⁴⁹ A counter-gift that is immediate and identical amounts to a refusal of the gift, i.e. the gift is returned. This lapse of time makes possible "the coexistence of two opposing truths, which defines the full truth of the gift" (Bourdieu, 5). The two opposing truths Bourdieu speaks of are the two formulations that I have presented: the structural view of anthropology ("the gift as seen from the outside") and the micro-sociological perspective, with its emphasis on the ideal of the generous and disinterested bestowal ("the gift as experienced, or, at least, meant to be experienced"). He labels the first approach objectivist and the latter phenomenological.

Bourdieu argues that the lapse of time between gift and counter-gift, and the absence of negotiation of what an appropriate return would be (which distinguish the gift from more explicitly self-interested sorts of exchange such as barter and loan with interest) "enables the gift or counter-gift to be seen as an inaugural act of generosity without any past or future, i.e. without calculation."

⁴⁹ "Generally, posthaste reciprocation of favors, which implies a refusal to stay indebted for a while and hence an insistence on a more business like relationship, is condemned as improper." Peter Blau, *op. cit.*, p. 99. "Excessive eagerness to discharge an obligation is a form of ingratitude." Francois La Rochefoucauld, *The Maxims*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 73.

(Bourdieu, 1971). This perception, which Bourdieu succinctly calls "the sincere fiction of disinterested exchange," transforms relations of mutual self-interest into relations of reciprocal gifts.

I think that Bourdieu's acknowledgment of the validity of both of these conceptions of what a gift is reflects a sound beginning towards a fruitful sociological understanding of the gift. Although his approach is grounded in the exchange tradition of Mauss, he enriches this tradition significantly by giving attention to what Mauss too casually dismisses as pretence and deception. But his formulation is ultimately disappointing because he resolves the paradox of the gift by rendering the pure gift a fictional ideal and a misrecognition of reality (self-interested exchange). Of course, the pure gift may be an ideal or a misrecognition. But to categorically restrict it to only these possibilities closes a complex issue prematurely. As noted earlier, the anthropologist or sociologist whose work is guided by exchange theorizing can always interpret acts of generosity as being motivated by underlying self-interest. If the more obvious categories of rewards are not apparent in a particular case, the exchange theorist can invoke the return of psychological satisfaction at pleasing another. It is a closed system that ultimately does injustice to the complexity of human behaviour and experience. The very existence of the concept "gift" indicates that humans

identify experiences that cannot be reduced to exchange. The exchange theorist chooses to render the "gift" a fiction; most humans do not. We identify certain experiences as existing in a realm outside of exchange, a realm that we accord special recognition to. Because of this, I will borrow Bourdieu's initial acknowledgement of two opposing truths rather than the whole of his argument.

From this initial foundation of two opposing truths, we will reconsider and attempt to refine several of the concepts that have been central to the discussion that has led to this point. Through this reconsideration I hope to effect some reconciliation between the two understandings of the gift that I have presented here, understandings which seem largely antagonistic and irreconcilable.

II

One way of resolving these apparent contradictions is to conclude that all gifts contain both generosity and a desire for some return benefit. This is a neat resolution, but scrutiny reveals it as facile. To achieve this resolution, it erases the contradictions and tensions that are fundamental to human life. As such, it is a neat intellectual trick but it requires the bending of fact to fit theory and thus falsifies human experience. I want to understand how these contradictions can co-exist, not erase them.

Additionally, this facile resolution erases the gift's magic and renders it ordinary. By reducing it to nothing more than a sub-category of exchange, we remove it from its special realm and relegate it to the domain of the ordinary exchanges that we participate in every day.

The first concept to be reconsidered here is the ideal of the pure gift. Empirical instances of ideals are rare by definition. If they were commonplace occurrences they would no longer serve as ideals to strive for. Inherent in the concept of the ideal, then, is a tension between expected and actual behaviour. The ideal of the pure gift, then, is not weakened or rendered false because empirical manifestations of it are rare.

That said, let us now turn our attention to empirical approximations of the pure gift. We have defined the pure gift as the gift that is given freely, unfettered by obligation and past indebtedness, and without an eye to the benefits that might accrue to the giver. We have also seen that this ideal is revered in our society, as well as in others. But can we imagine or point to a situation that illustrates that every "pure" gift may not be an act deserving reverence?

We earlier identified two views of the morality of the gift: morality as constituted in the consciousness of the giver, and morality as the social structural effects of gift

exchange. An assumption that has underlied our discussion of the pure gift is that this is the kind of gift that binds persons together most effectively. In short, the approximation of one ideal (the pure gift) necessarily produces the other (social integration). But this is not necessarily true. The great and generous gift may not have this integrative effect. It may be refused because it is out of proportion to the recipient's definition of his or her relationship with the giver. And even though a gift may be a sincere expression of generosity, it may be entirely inappropriate for the receiver. An extreme example to illustrate: Someone may give me--with the purest intentions--a horse. He genuinely wishes me to have the horse. He is not giving it to me to alleviate a sense of indebtedness. He does not hope to persuade me to offer him something that he desires as a return gift. Nor does he hope to gain power over me. It is, it would appear, a great and generous gift, and one that closely approximates the ideal of the pure gift. But if I live in a one-room apartment in a large city and despise all forms of four-legged creatures, it is a stupid gift, despite its purity.⁵⁰ This example has a strong morality-as-consciousness component (it approximates the

⁵⁰ The reader may object that this example is unrealistic. But it is only a deliberate exaggeration (for illustrative purposes) of a kind of gift that we are all likely familiar with. Most of us have probably received (and given) gifts of various degrees of inappropriateness.

pure gift ideal); but it has no structural component. It is unlikely to bind giver and receiver. In fact, it is likely to have the opposite effect because it underscores how broad the gulf between giver and receiver really is. It is tangible evidence that the giver does not really know the receiver, for if he did he would not have given a gift so inappropriate to the recipient's tastes, needs, and desires.

We can see from this brief discussion that a gift that approximates one ideal (the pure gift) does not necessarily affirm the other (the gift's integrative effect). And the gift that fails to affirm this second ideal is a failure sociologically. The ideal of the pure gift is certainly worthy of esteem, but if it produces no sociological benefits then it is an empty moral act, like a charitable donation that never reaches the recipient it was intended to benefit.

III

Up to this point, self-interest and generosity have been depicted as irreconcilable opposites. Implicit in the ideal of generous giving is the corollary that the presence of self-interest corrupts a gift. But does self-interest really devalue a gift, or is the existence of the gift--however impure--more important than the presence of self-interest? In other words, does the gift have an intrinsic goodness or value that transcends the presence of motives other than generosity?

Undoubtedly, the pure gift--which Gouldner aptly refers to as a rare prodigy of social interaction-- is an ideal to be cherished. But in cherishing the ideal must we concomitantly devalue the gift that fails to fully live up to the ideal? Pure gifts are empirical rarities; we can always identify some expectation of return in most gifts. Most of us venerate the ideal of free and generous giving, but we will likely have difficulty identifying many of our personal relationships as significantly asymmetrical. Parents give many more concrete gifts to their children than the children give in return, but few parents will deny that they receive intangible rewards or gifts from their children.⁵¹ Similarly, graduate students sometimes feel an inordinate imbalance in their relationships with thesis advisers, i.e. they feel that they receive far more than they give.⁵² But often students in this situation fail to consider that the professor may perceive the student's interest in his or her guidance as especially rewarding, as much as the student perceives the professor's assistance as a special privilege. The truth of the matter is that few of us will continue to give gifts to or do favours for persons whom we do not perceive as providing us with some reciprocal

⁵¹ "What the child gives the parent is particularly subtle: in the present, delight; for the future, hope--nothing so blatant as bottles of milk and clean diapers." Garrett Hardin, The Limits of Altruism, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 23.

⁵² Of course, the opposite case--where the student feels exploited, neglected, or abused by his or her thesis advisor--is at least as common.

benefit or satisfaction. As we can see in both of these examples, reciprocation may occur entirely without the "reciprocator" being aware that he or she is giving something in return. In fact, in the second example both parties may define the other's contribution to the interaction as a gift, but not their own contribution, and thus produce an odd state of mutual indebtedness. In such a case the "gifts" are defined as gifts by their recipients; the givers are unaware that what they give to the relationship is being defined as special and above and beyond what is expected of a person in the role of student or professor.⁵³

If we accept that there is at least a crude symmetry in most of our personal relationships, how do we create a place for the gift? That is, how does a fundamentally asymmetrical concept exist within symmetrical relationships? The concepts "self-interest" and "expected returns" have been used rather vaguely up to this point. The following discussion will attempt to refine what exactly constitutes self-interest, the different kinds of returns that may be expected for a gift, and how these expectations may contradict (in some cases), or coexist with (in others) the ideal of the pure gift.

⁵³ This idea of something being formulated as a gift by the person who receives it, but not by the person who gives it, was suggested to me by Patricia Cormack.

We can identify a wide range of things that the giver (and/or receiver) of a gift may identify as a return for a gift given. Although the most obvious are expressions of gratitude and reciprocal gifts in kind, we can identify others, as illustrated by the two examples just presented. We can distinguish two different levels of expectation of return. In the first, the giver does not seek to profit from the exchange. In this case the giver would like to receive some reciprocal benefit, but is not ruled by this consideration. Rather, his or her primary concern is giving something that the recipient will enjoy or benefit from. The second category of expected returns is essentially exchange for profit or maximization of utility. The giver wishes to acquire as much as possible while giving up as little as possible. The giver in the first case has the benefit of the other in mind (in the spirit of the ideal of the pure gift), while in the second, exploitation of the other is the prime concern. Let us consider an example of each.

In The Elementary Structures of Kinship, Claude Levi-Strauss describes and analyses a seemingly unremarkable ritual that often accompanies meals in inexpensive restaurants in France.⁵⁴ In these restaurants, patrons are

⁵⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss, The Elementary Structures of Kinship, trans. by J.H. Bell, et. al., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 58-60. This book was first published (in French) in 1949, so it is possible that the custom that Levi-Strauss describes no longer exists. But, in deference to another custom, I will use the present tense

often required to share tables with strangers because individual places carry a high tariff. The French customarily ignore persons whom they do not know.

But in the little restaurant, such people find themselves in a quite close relationship for one to one-and-a-half hours, and temporarily united by a similar preoccupation. A conflict exists, not very keen to be sure, but real enough and sufficient to create a state of tension between the norm of privacy and the fact of community. (p. 59)

In many of these restaurants, a small bottle of wine ("more often than not very bad" according to Levi-Strauss) is included in the price of a meal. Each person's bottle is identical in size and quality to those of his or her neighbour's, as are the portions of meat and vegetables that the wine accompanies.

Nevertheless, a remarkable difference in attitude towards the wine and the food is immediately manifested. Food serves the body's needs and wine its taste for luxury, the first serving to nourish, the second, to honour. Each person at the table eats, so to speak, for himself. . . . But it is entirely different with the wine. . . . wine is a social commodity, while the plat du jour is a personal commodity. The little bottle may contain exactly one glassful, yet the contents will be poured out, not into the owner's glass, but into his neighbour's. And his neighbour will immediately make a corresponding gesture of reciprocity. (p. 58)

From an economic point of view, no one has gained and no one has lost. No one has any more nor any less wine than he or she was originally served. But from a sociological point of view, much has occurred. "Society has appeared where

here.

there was none before."⁵⁵ For a brief time strangers are placed in close spatial proximity. Anxieties are likely to arise if these reluctant companions choose to maintain their social distance.

This is the fleeting but difficult situation resolved by the exchanging of wine. It is an assertion of good grace which does away with the mutual uncertainty. It substitutes a social relationship for spatial juxtaposition. But it is also more than that. The partner who was entitled to maintain his reserve is persuaded to give it up. Wine offered calls for wine returned, cordiality requires cordiality. The relationship of indifference can never be restored once it has been ended by one of the table companions. From now on the relationship can only be cordial or hostile. There is no way of refusing the neighbour's offer of his glass of wine without being insulting. Further, the acceptance of this offer sanctions another offer, for conversation. In this way a whole range of trivial social ties are established by a series of alternating oscillations. (p. 59)

Although this transaction revolves around material goods (the wine), it is more notable for the social relations that accompany and emerge from material transaction. We can extrapolate from this example to situations where the things given are not identical, and where the participants are not strangers. In this case, although people give gifts and expect something in return, they don't seek to profit from the relationship at the other's expense. These are far from the idealized pure gift; they are clearly exchanges. But they are also something other than purely economic exchange, where individuals confront each other seeking to maximize

⁵⁵ Hyde, op. cit., p. 56.

profit. In spite of their "impurity," there remains something morally good here; something is expected in return, but the central impulse is to give, to please, etc., rather than to obtain some return. Additionally, through this exchange of pleasurable offerings, the ideal of social integration that the anthropological model of gift exchange is built upon is also affirmed. I will call this the true gift: the gift whose chief interest is something other than the return it might bring from the person who receives it.

We can think of other gifts where the giver's chief concern is what he will receive in return for his gift. Here the giver has little concern for the benefit of the other, only that minimal satisfaction sufficient to elicit the desired return. This kind of gift is a gift in name only. If we were to penetrate to the essence of this kind of social act, we would discover more of the character of bribery or barter than the gift. This is a false gift, one which possesses the outward character of a gift, but is in truth something else.

Transactions in the illicit drug trade provide us with an illustration of the false gift. Drug dealers are often especially generous in their initial transactions with new customers, providing free samples or extra amounts of the drug in excess of the quantity paid for. The dealer's concern is not primarily with the benefit or pleasure that the recipient of his beneficence will receive. His concern

is with the customer's continued patronage and, in the case of physically addictive drugs, the customer's addiction and physical dependence on the substance that the dealer can make a profit selling to him.

In the late 1970's, an international boycott was organized against Nestle to protest that company's marketing of infant formula in Third World countries. Critics levelled two principal charges against Nestle. First, they charged that Nestle employees distributed just enough free samples of formula to Third World mothers to cause them to cease producing their own natural milk, leaving them wholly dependent on the substitute that Nestle provided. Secondly, the organizers of the boycott alleged that Nestle representatives failed to inform mothers of the dangers of mixing formula with impure water, which is often the only kind available in these drought-ridden countries. The result of these practices, according to critics, were thousands of cases of malnutrition, disease, and death. (Nestle denied the charges and made token changes in its advertising of formula.) As in the first example, this one illustrates how "gifts" may be used to benefit the giver at the expense of the recipient.

The point I have tried to make with this distinction between the true gift and the false gift is the intrinsic goodness of a gift, even when self-interest is easily identifiable. By distinguishing two different degrees of

self-interest, I have shown that one spoils the gift outright, but the other does not. In the case of the true gift the desire to please and benefit another underlies the gift, and is not spoiled by the presence of a modicum of self-interest.

IV.

I have noted several times that one of the paradoxes of the gift is that the most generous and thoughtful givers--those who expect the least in return for their gifts--tend to receive great returns, e.g. recall the Scottish folk tale of the three sisters. The two older sisters chose the options that were instrumentally most logical--the large loaf, and not sharing it with the birds--but they received no favours from fate. The youngest sister, on the other hand, chose the small loaf (and her mother's blessing), unselfishly shared it with the birds (asking only that they keep her company), and then received the benefits that eluded her sisters.

Gouldner's comments on this paradox merit repeating:

There is no gift more certain to command attention than the gift that need not have been given because of our past indebtedness, or future ambitions, or our present sense of obligation. The paradox is this: there is no gift that brings a higher return than the free gift, the gift given with no strings attached. For that which is given freely moves men deeply and makes them most indebted to their benefactors.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Gouldner, op. cit., p. 277.

What is it that moves the recipient of a gift to reciprocate? And why do some gifts elicit greater returns than others? We feel indebted in some way to those who give us gifts. In the vocabulary of gifts, the concept of "obligation" is often used to define various different meanings of indebtedness. We will recall that for anthropology, obligation is what initiates and keeps alive systems of gift exchange. Mauss argues that gift exchange is built upon three social obligations: the obligations to give, to receive, and to reciprocate, the last being most important because it renews the cycle. For Mauss, obligation is an institutionalized moral imperative. But from a social-psychological perspective, obligation refers to the subjective experience of that social imperative. By examining the different ways that we experience obligation, we can further clarify how the two approaches to the gift that this thesis is concerned with are not entirely antagonistic and irreconcilable.

Sometimes we receive gifts from persons whose motives we have reason to be suspicious of and we wonder if there are strings attached to the gift. In these cases, we experience obligation as an onerous and irritating burden that oppresses us. Although expressing gratitude or giving a return gift are unpleasant chores, we want to discharge this sort of obligation (and its correlative social ties) as quickly and completely as possible. We do not want to

remain indebted to someone we suspect of manipulating or using us. Consequently, we respond to the suspect gift with a token expression of gratitude or give a perfunctory and uninspired gift in return.⁵⁷

But the subjective experience of obligation can take a different form. When someone gives us something that we find desirable, and we have no reason to question the integrity of his or her motives, we can accept the gift without suspicion or doubt. When we are free to accept the gift in this way, we are moved and gladdened, and our lives are enriched. In this case, the experience of obligation or indebtedness is qualitatively different than in the case of gifts that we are suspicious of. Rather than being an unpleasant experience to be avoided, this is desirable. What we feel in response to a gift of this sort is a desire to participate in the spirit of the gift, in its celebration of the ties that bind persons together. In expressing gratitude or giving a return gift, we are not merely settling an account, but cultivating and participating in that spirit. Paraphrasing Neruda, when someone freely gives us some of the good things of life, we are moved and genuinely want (not feel obligated or constrained) to give some of the other good things of life to the person that has

⁵⁷ Pamela Shurmer argues that we give more personal and individual gifts to those we are emotionally close to. At the opposite end of the continuum of intimacy, gifts are more customary and impersonal. "Safe and boring gifts represent distance." Pamela Shurmer, "The Gift Game," New Society, 18 (23 December 1971), p. 1244.

given us this pleasure. Here, we do not desire to discharge our feelings of gratitude and obligation immediately, because this kind of obligation enriches our life rather than weighs it down. Additionally, to reciprocate immediately and completely would diminish the meaning of the initial gift. Instead, we are moved to savor the gift (and the giver) and reciprocate at a later time with something that we know will please the giver as he or she has pleased us.⁵⁸

We can further clarify these two different senses of obligation through the following example. In hot summer weather, domesticated dogs appreciate it when humans blow on them to provide them with a temporary feeling of coolness. Every dog that I can remember doing this to has responded by wagging its tail and licking my face, which we humans usually define as the dog's way of expressing pleasure and gratitude. The point I want to make here is that the dog knows nothing of a norm of reciprocity; that is part of a human cultural system. But, in spite of this ignorance, the dog makes a reciprocal gesture. It expresses its gratitude spontaneously, without reference to the human concept of obligation. Someone has done something good for it, and it wants to do something good for the human. The dog doesn't

⁵⁸ Personal letters (which possess elements of the gift) also exhibit this possibility of different subjective experiences. Dull, lifeless letters do not inspire us to respond with vigour. But those letters that make us laugh or cry or move us deeply in some other way inspire us to respond in an equally lively manner.

have the ability to express its gratitude verbally, nor is it able give the human the same sensory pleasure as the breath of air gave it. So it responds with a gesture (licking) that may be partly symbolic and practical (the dog could believe that its wet lick provides the same cooling sensation to the human as the breath of air gave to it).

The dog's response, which I equate with the second kind of obligation that I have discussed, is not cultural. Our human response to this sense of obligation is not acultural in the same sense as the dog's, but the two situations share something that the obligatory response to the gift that we are suspicious of doesn't. There is no sense of a social force that compels us to do something that we don't truly want to do.

How does this refinement of the meanings of obligation help us to reconcile the apparent contradictions of the anthropological and everyday understandings of the gift? The structural function of gift exchange--the ideal of the anthropological understanding--is best served when the ideal of our everyday understanding is most closely approximated. The uninspired, self-interested, or undesired gift may bind giver and receiver, but not likely in the deep and enduring way that gifts that approximate the ideal of the pure gift can. We feel obligated to accept and reciprocate gifts of the first sort, but we do so with suspicion and without enthusiasm. The gifts that stir and cultivate our deepest

and most profound attachments are those that move us most. The gifts that move us most are those that are given most freely; when we are suspicious of the giver's motives, we are moved little, if at all.

If we accept that our most subjectively and affectively cherished interpersonal attachments are formed and sustained by the freest and most generous gifts, then self-interest is not essential to the operation of the anthropological model of gift exchange. Gifts that are conditional on an expected return may foster some kind of social ties, but they are likely to be less emotionally meaningful and intense than the ties formed by gifts where the expectation of return is secondary to the desire to give something to another. Day-to-day customary gifts, promises, favours, and courtesies-- and the superficial, though very significant, sort of amiability they generate-- are clearly essential to social cohesion in industrial societies. But in smaller, more intimate groups, more is required. Where deep and enduring emotional attachments are desired, it is the great gifts given, promises kept, transgressions forgiven, etc. that most effectively foster these attachments.⁵⁹ Obligation, as Mauss formulates it, may be sufficient to explain how societies--pre-industrial and industrial--are formed and survive, but the deeper and more desirable sense

⁵⁹ It hardly needs to be said that, here, "great" does not refer to size or monetary value, but rather to subjective significance.

of obligation is required for the more emotionally meaningful and substantial attachments between individuals.

CONCLUSION

"Moral action is action which affirms life."⁶⁰

I

In this thesis I have attempted to record the development of my thinking about the nature of the gift. Although it is not a strictly chronological record, it is faithful to the sequence of the major problems that I encountered and attempted to address.

This project was inspired by some initial observations about the social psychology of giving and receiving gifts in our society. As I gave more and more thought to these observations, the possibility of writing a thesis on the gift entered my mind. I began to do some initial library research, but soon found that sociology had devoted little attention to this topic. At the same time, though, I discovered a wealth of anthropological literature on gift exchange in small non-industrial societies where gifts are the institution around which social and economic relations are organized. I found that this literature emphasized certain features of gift exchange and neglected others, producing an understanding of the gift that was foreign in

⁶⁰ John Gardner, On Moral Fiction, (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 23.

fundamental ways to how I conceived of the gift. Anthropology's emphasis was predominantly macro-sociological, emphasizing the sociological effects of systems of gift exchange, while my interests were primarily micro-sociological, emphasizing the subjective experience of the act of the gift.

This led me to further examine the ideal of the pure gift, which is the aspect of the gift that I felt was most fundamental to the concept, and the one most neglected by most anthropologists and sociologists who have studied the topic. This ideal is central to the concept "gift" in our society, as well as amongst the members of the small societies studied by anthropologists, but most anthropologists and many sociologists dismiss this ideal as ideology, a lie, or a misrecognition of reality. As I explored the meaning and significance of this ideal, I found that the anthropological perspective not only neglected it, but was in fact built upon different assumptions about human nature. In short, I had presented two equally legitimate views of the gift; each gave an accurate representation from its particular viewpoint, but with the attendant biases and omissions of any particular viewpoint. The difficult problem that arose here was that these views, both with valuable insights about the gift, were opposed to each other in fundamental ways. If both offered legitimate insights, but also contradicted each other, how could they co-exist?

Were they really as antagonistic as I suspected, or were they in fact complementary and compatible, i.e. only superficially irreconcilable? The last chapter of my thesis is my attempt to come to terms with these questions.

These two approaches are not entirely without contradictions, but neither are they entirely antagonistic. What I hope I have shown is an understanding of these contradictions, how they coexist, and how these contradictions are reflected in our experiences of giving and receiving gifts.

The most significant reconciliation that I was able to achieve involved a modification of the anthropological conception of the gift. By showing that self-interested exchange was not the only way to effect social solidarity, and that free gifts may be more effective in achieving this end, I showed that a macro-sociological understanding of the gift did not have to render the pure gift a lie, a fiction, or a misrecognition of reality.

II

Some readers may conclude that this thesis has come to an unsatisfactory, imperfect end, disappointed that it has promised more than it has delivered. I myself share some of that dissatisfaction. But that is mainly a result of my unrealistic expectations and the complexity of the topic. No neat, all-inclusive solutions have been offered; indeed,

they have been regarded with suspicion. There is something to be said for a project that leaves loose ends hanging, contradictions unresolved, etc. Human life is not without contradictions; in fact, human life is marked by contradictions and the tensions that arise from them. Perhaps those studies that don't leave strings hanging are the ones that should be regarded as unsatisfactory and imperfect. Intellectually, we may be able to resolve contradictions, but we risk oversimplifying the complexity of human experience to achieve this resolution.

Other readers may dismiss it as a self-indulgent exercise in sophistry. Perhaps it is. At those times when I became discouraged (not an infrequent occurrence), I sometimes thought so myself. At those times, the voice of doubt would ask "What does all this conceptual hair-splitting have to do with practical matters?" This is a question of some importance to me. If the writer cannot see the link between his theoretical concerns and the empirical context those concerns arise from, then his reader cannot be expected to either. But when my vision was not blinded by doubt, I saw that, indeed, this work had value beyond the satisfaction of formal institutional requirements.

One of the problems confronted by a researcher dealing with commonplace micro-sociological matters such as the gift is our familiarity with the phenomenon. But at the low analytical level of everyday experience, we often have an

incomplete appreciation of the complexity of a phenomenon. The analytical thinker's job is to uncover and systematically communicate the complexity of the phenomenon, reveal different levels of meaning, and explain its formal/structural features that shape our subjective experience of it. If, having reached this point in my thesis, the reader feels he or she has a clearer understanding of his or her experiences of giving and receiving gifts, then I have been successful.

III

Although I have examined numerous aspects of the gift, other aspects have only been briefly mentioned, while others have been neglected entirely. These merit further consideration.

There has been an underlying tone of arbitrariness to the way I have defined the gift and a broader study would likely find interesting cross-cultural and historical differences in the meanings and circumstances of gift giving. Guides to social etiquette and manners--which Lewis Hyde aptly refers to as "textbooks of domestic ethnography"⁶¹--are rich sources of information, particularly for the latter. These books give elaborate instructions about appropriate and inappropriate gifts, how different kinds of gifts should be reciprocated, what kinds of gifts can and should be refused,

⁶¹ Hyde, op. cit., p. 102.

how one should deal with a poorly chosen gift, etc.⁶²

Gifts to and from corporate entities have been used as illustrations throughout, but they deserve further consideration in and of themselves. More than in interpersonal relations, gifts from nations or corporations deserve merit critical scrutiny. Humans can love, feel pity, make sacrifices, etc., but corporate entities cannot. Therefore, their gifts, which are ostensibly offered freely and generously, must be examined for underlying instrumentality. Nevertheless, such critical analysis should not overlook the fact that these gifts do benefit the recipient, despite any impurity in the donor's motives. Aid from the developed world to the Third World undoubtedly benefits the donor countries' economies, but it also benefits the people of the impoverished countries. Perhaps only temporarily, or with detrimental long-term consequences, but some benefit is received.

Graceful gift giving and receiving are arts perfected by few of us.

Who is there who has never felt badly because of a failure to express his appreciation in full measure? Warm spontaneity is so easily mistaken for affectation! And a perfectly true expression

⁶² Good starting points for researchers interested in these areas are Emily Post, Etiquette, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1965), and Judith Martin, Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior, (New York: Atheneum, 1982). The first takes its business very seriously, but the second gleefully pokes fun at its subject. It hardly needs to be stated that there is a definite but rarely acknowledged class bias to many of these books.

("I am deeply moved by your gesture") can so soon lose all its meaning...The more unexpected and personal the gift, the more it touches the heart, but this emotion is not always easily expressed⁶³

Examining the strategies and characteristics of especially graceful givers and receivers (and their awkward counterparts) would give us insight into the social psychology of emotionally charged interactions. Literature would be a rich initial source for this topic.

Further studies should also examine the significance of gifts to ritual occasions such as Christmas, weddings, birthdays, graduations, confirmations, etc. The role gifts play in the definition of identity and status also merits consideration. For example:

When a single present is offered to a plurality, for example, a married or engaged couple, or a family, there is a heightening awareness (on both sides) of their existence as a team.⁶⁴

IV

Finally, my goal in this thesis has been to integrate our lived experience of the gift with an analytical understanding of its structural features. The first is primarily a member's understanding, the second, an analyst's. Most of our day-to-day lives are lived with deceptively tenuous understandings of the concepts we use. A lifetime is not long enough for each of us to individually

⁶³ Tournier, op. cit., p. 40.

⁶⁴ Barry Schwartz, "The Social Psychology of the Gift," American Journal of Sociology, 73 (1967), p. 11

analyse and fully understand the characteristics, boundaries, contradictions, and ambiguities of all of our concepts. That is our collective human project, extending from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to Hegel, Simmel, and to ourselves, in our humble attempts to be worthy inheritors, curators, and carriers of this tradition.

As a student of the discipline, I have found that most sociological studies do not see this integration of experience and analysis as their guiding principle. I suspect that this can be attributed to the belief that the description of immediate human experience is not the mandate of science, but of art or journalism. But it is crucial that we keep in mind that those experiences are what should guide our sociological projects. Sociologists need not sacrifice their analytical rigorousness to incorporate a consideration of the concrete and immediate lived experiences of human beings. Articulating human experience need not be the exclusive domain of novelists, poets, filmmakers, songwriters, etc.

What I am suggesting is a union of sociology and psychology of a different kind than one typically encounters in most current social psychology. I think that Simmel is the sociologist who is the most appropriate model for the social psychology (or psycho-sociology) I am suggesting. He seemed comfortable with both sociology and psychology (as well as other disciplines), and moved gracefully, often

within a single thought, from one level to the other. By doing so, he avoided the constraints and prejudices of each, never forgetting that a multidisciplinary approach would provide the most comprehensive understanding of human life.

The goal of a social psychology in Simmel's image would be this: the articulation of the connections between immediate human experience and the social structural context that both shapes that experience and issues from it. I have tried to be faithful to this vision, and I hope to remain so in the future.

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