

# The Question of the Gift

Essays across disciplines

*Edited by*  
Mark Osteen

 **Routledge**  
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# The Question of the Gift

*The Question of the Gift* is the first collection of new interdisciplinary essays on the gift. Bringing together scholars from a variety of fields, including anthropology, literary criticism, economics, philosophy and classics, it provides new paradigms and poses new questions concerning the theory and practice of gift exchange.

In a culture awash with the rhetoric of self-interest, understanding the gift is more important than ever. Thus this collection raises essential questions for social life:

- How do non-commercial exchanges form and solidify communities?
- How do humans and objects interact outside of consumerism?
- What are the relationships between gifts and commodities?
- To what degree are artworks gifts?
- Is a truly free gift possible, or even desirable?

In addressing these questions, contributors not only challenge the conventions of their fields, but also combine ideas and methods from both the social sciences and humanities to forge innovative ways of confronting this universal phenomenon.

**Mark Osteen** is Professor of English and Director of Film Studies at Loyola College, Baltimore. He is the author of *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo's Dialogue with Culture* (2000) and *The Economy of Ulysses: Making Both Ends Meet* (1995); the editor of the Viking Critical Edition of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1998) and co-editor, with Martha Woodmansee, of *The New Economic Criticism* (Routledge, 1999).

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The initial impetus for *The Question of the Gift* emerged from discussions at the Culture and Economics Conference at Exeter, UK, in July 1998, where I heard early versions of the chapters by Jacqui Sadashige, Anthony Fothergill and Antonio Callari. The conference co-sponsors – Regenia Gagnier, John Dupre, and Martha Woodmansee, the executive officer of the Society for Critical Exchange – thus deserve grateful acknowledgment. The Society for Critical Exchange also sponsored a panel on the gift at the following year’s MLA convention, from which the idea for this collection, as well as its title, sprang.

Originally this was to be a co-edited volume. Although my collaborator, Max Thomas, elected to withdraw from the project, his advice in soliciting, selecting and editing papers at the early stages was indispensable. I would also like to thank Professors Jonathan Parry, Chris Gregory and Marilyn Strathern for recommending the work of James Laidlaw and Yunxiang Yan. Closer to home, my colleagues at the Loyola College English department have offered unflagging support, and the Loyola Faculty Development Committee saw fit to give me a summer research grant in 2000 that aided immensely.

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Two of these essays were originally published elsewhere: Chapter 1, “A free gift makes no friends,” by James Laidlaw, was previously published in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society* 6.4 (December 2000). Chapter 6, “Adam Smith and the debt of gratitude,” by Eun Kyung Min, was previously published in *Studies of English Languages & Cultures* 4 (1996): 47–75. I gratefully acknowledge both journals for granting permission to reprint.

# Introduction

## Questions of the gift

*Mark Osteen*

The nature of gifts and gift giving has intrigued thinkers since the beginning of Western civilization. We can see the outlines of modern ideas about generosity, gratitude and obligation forming in both the Old Testament and *The Odyssey*. More recently, thinkers as different as Adam Smith, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Friedrich Nietzsche have explored the meanings of gifts. In the twentieth century, Marcel Mauss's landmark 1925 anthropological study-cum-historical romance *Essai sur le don* prompted scholars from a variety of disciplines to reopen the question of the gift. Yet despite Mauss's thesis that gifts are complex social practices governed by particular norms and obligations (Mauss 1990: 76), in recent years they have usually been either explained away as disguised self-interest or sentimentalized as a remnant of a golden age of pure generosity. This volume seeks to transcend these trite polarities by posing new questions and offering new paradigms regarding gifts and the discourses surrounding them. If, as Jacques T. Godbout argues, "the implicit and the unsaid reign supreme" in the realm of the gift (1998: 4–5), this collection aims to unseat that reign and hold those implicit norms up to the light of critical analysis.

The present volume represents innovative scholarly thinking about gifts in fields ranging from anthropology and sociology to literature, philosophy, ethics and economics. Each discipline asks a different set of questions, determined not only by the disparate areas of human behavior that each addresses, but also by the biases inherent in each field. Yet beneath this wide span of fields and interests a group of common questions will emerge: to what degree are human interactions motivated by self-interest? Is it possible to give without expectation of reward? When obligations are attached to gifts, what form do they take? Why, after all, do human beings give presents and to whom do we give them?

These questions seem to belong to the realms of anthropology, sociology and ethics. But the questions of the gift are also narrative matters: that is, they interpret the stories we tell about social interaction. Not only do we informally tell such stories to ourselves every day, but we also create more formal narratives about gifts in poems, novels, plays and letters. With the belief that we can acquire an adequate comprehension of gift behaviors only by scrutinizing these more formal linguistic constructs, this volume presents a group of literary interventions into questions of the gift. But these essays by no means stand apart from

the anthropological or theoretical contributions; rather, they illustrate and enrich them, demonstrating how literary artists in societies as different as republican Rome and the twentieth-century USA have portrayed and analyzed gift relationships. Finally, the following essays, and particularly the final group of theoretical forays, offer not only new narratives – sociological, anthropological, literary, historical – but also new metanarratives about the gift. These stories about our stories will, we hope, inspire scholars in numerous disciplines to propose more nuanced and authentic ways of representing how and why human beings give presents. Such work is essential because, as Alan Schrift observes in his introduction to *The Logic of the Gift*, the question of the gift “addresses fundamental issues of intersubjective interaction” (1997: 18); explaining its motives and meanings is hence necessary to a fully ethical conception of social life.

## **Mauss’s legacy**

### ***Definitions***

Jacques Godbout and Alain Caillé state that “any exchange of goods or services with no guarantee of recompense in order to create, nourish, or create social bonds between people is a gift” (Godbout 1998: 20; cf. Caillé 2001: 37). Like many definitions of the gift, this one begs a key question: are gifts given freely, or do they involve some implicit expectation of reward? Godbout and Caillé stipulate that there is “no guarantee,” but many theorists – Mauss himself, as well as more recent writers such as Jacques Derrida and Pierre Bourdieu – argue that all gifts arrive burdened with obligations, and hence that a truly free gift is impossible. It is clear from the outset, then, that any useful definition of gift practices must begin not merely by describing behavior but by analyzing motives. More specifically, according to Helmuth Berking, the gift may be divided into four related but discrete components: the gift object; the sequence of giving and taking; the actors’ own understandings of their acts and motives; and the rules or principles governing their behavior (1999: 4). Each of these components invites concentrated inquiry. Berking goes on to define gift giving as a “ritual practice through which the current value of a relationship may be communicated and maintained” (1999: 5). Gifts, in other words, are concrete representations of social relations. What kind of relations? Certainly we do not give gifts to everyone whom we encounter, and most gift theorists recognize a distinction between the domains of market and gift. This distinction has been delineated in diverse ways, as we will see. What seems obvious, however, is that defining the gift is no easy task, because it immediately raises the question of whether any such thing exists.

The most influential and detailed definition of the gift is surely found in Mauss’s *Essai*: as economist Philip Mirowski notes, “in economic anthropology, all roads to the gift lead back to Marcel Mauss” (2001: 438). Indeed, it would be difficult to find a text in the human sciences that has had more impact than Mauss’s brief monograph. Yet his *Essai* was hardly without precedents: as a

nephew of Emile Durkheim, Mauss was both Durkheim's intellectual heir and the scion of a distinguished tradition of French social thought. Mauss voices a set of ideas that challenges the definition of liberal society that dominates Anglo-American social thought even today, particularly the tenacious faith in autonomous, freely choosing individuals (Douglas 1990: x). Furthermore, if *The Gift* both heralded and catalyzed the rise of modern anthropology, it also manifested a trend toward comparativism and an attention to "primitive" cultural practices that was already well underway in Modernist art: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* refers repeatedly to Jessie L. Weston's work on ritual and romance; post-impressionist painters were incorporating the techniques and forms of African and Melanesian art; Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* had presumed the universality of ritual. Still, Mauss's work has become one of anthropology's sacred texts (Parry 1986: 455). Like any such foundational text, it has been subject to numerous, often contradictory interpretations. For *The Gift* is not just a synthesis of anthropological research; it is also a history of culture and a work of moral philosophy. Scholars with diverse disciplinary and political allegiances have emphasized different passages and drawn different conclusions from it, so that *The Gift* bears within it the seeds of virtually every important study of gift giving that has succeeded it.

Mauss boldly states his thesis right at the beginning: in many societies – not just "archaic" or "primitive" societies, although more clearly in them – "exchanges and contracts take the form of presents; [though] in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily" (1990: 3). Gift exchanges are "total social phenomena" in which "all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time" (1990: 3). Thus the first question of *The Gift* remains the essential question of the gift: "What rule of legality or self-interest ... compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?" (1990: 3).<sup>1</sup> Within this question, however, is concealed an assumption: that the essence of the gift resides in the object given.

Basing his interpretation upon the words of a Maori sage named Ranaipiri, Mauss held that a spirit – named *hau* by the Maori – within the objects given causes them to be passed on. Claude Lévi-Strauss objected to this apparently uncritical acceptance of indigenous explanations, and further argued that the definition is merely circular (1997: 55). *Hau*, he countered, is nothing but an empty signifier that reveals the true nature of the gift to be a consequence of a surplus of signifiers without signifieds.<sup>2</sup> Raymond Firth criticized Mauss for confusing the *hau* of the gift with the *hau* of the giver (Yan 1996: 6): that is, it is not the object but the person giving it who frames the obligations and rewards required. Later, in his highly influential treatise *Stone Age Economics*, Marshall Sahlins equated *hau* with a general principle of increase. According to Sahlins, the secular meaning of *hau* is "profit" or "product of"; in religious terms, it may be translated as "fertility" (1972: 160, 167). More recently, Yunxiang Yan argues that the spirit *conveyed* by the gift, not the spirit *of* the gift, constitutes its social force (1996: 216–17; emphasis in original). This controversy may in fact be

nothing more than a difference of emphasis, for clearly it is givers and receivers who imbue objects with the personality of the original giver and who therefore perceive some spirit within objects that preserves the imprint of the original owner. For my purposes, what is more significant is the assumption beneath the definition: that for “primitive” people, “everything speaks” (Mauss 1990: 44). Persons and things partake of each other. Thus Mauss emphasizes that things possess a personality because they continue to be identified with the giver or, in some cases, the recipient.<sup>3</sup> Hence, by “giving one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself* it is because one ‘owes’ *oneself*— one’s person and one’s goods – to others” (1990: 46; emphasis in original). The “persons” who live in these societies, in other words, represent themselves not as the self-interested individuals of neoclassical economics but as a nexus of social obligations.

### ***Redefining reciprocity***

Most famously, Mauss wrote that the “system of total prestations” in archaic societies involves members who seek prestige in three interlocking obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (1990: 39). These obligations are particularly coercive in societies such as the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest who practice rituals of squandering and excessive giving called potlatch ceremonies. Here the aim is to crush a rival with obligations he cannot repay, to give so much that eventually reciprocation becomes impossible. Ironically, then, as Maurice Godelier has pointed out, the ultimate aim of the potlatch is to break the chain of reciprocity (1999: 58). Although Mauss dubbed the potlatch a “monstrous product” of the gift system (1990: 42), and although later ethnographic research has discovered that the forms studied by Mauss’s sources were exaggerated distortions of earlier ceremonies, the potlatch has been analyzed more than any other “primitive” gift system other than the *kula* ring. Georges Bataille, in particular, expands the potlatch into a grand synecdoche for what he perceives to be a universal human desire for expenditure. We will return to Bataille and his influence on literary theory below. For Mauss, however, the important point about potlatch is that “to refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war” (1990: 13); the exchange of gifts supplants the exchange of blows because the former creates tangible and enforceable but non-violent modes of coercion. Make no mistake: these “gifts” are obligatory.

Although Mauss claims that the essence of the potlatch is the obligation to give (1990: 39), in every other respect the most important of the three obligations is the requirement to reciprocate. Thus we may rephrase Mauss’s opening question as follows: what is the nature and reach of reciprocity? What sorts of payments surround gifts that distinguish them from other transactions? The principle of reciprocity has long been a crux in social theory. In 1960 Alvin Gouldner named the “norm of reciprocity” as the pivotal “starting” and “stabilizing” mechanism for social interaction (1996: 65). For Gouldner, reciprocity both initiates relationships, by encouraging those who have received attention to return it, and solidifies already established relationships, by ensuring that they

involve relatively equal give and take. A few years later, Sahlins devised a spectrum of social relations based upon the mode of reciprocity most prevalent in each transaction. Hence, in the family, “generalized reciprocity” reigns. Here obligations remain implicit and may extend for a time or even indefinitely. “Negative reciprocity,” characterized by suspicion and exploitation, dominates interactions among strangers. Somewhere between these poles lies “balanced reciprocity,” where transactions tend toward equivalence (see Sahlins 1972: 193–9). The emotional connection among parties determines the nature of their transactions, so that “if friends make gifts, gifts make friends” (Sahlins 1972: 186). While this schema provides a useful model for categorizing social expectations, Sahlins himself warns that the term “reciprocity” can be so vague as to disguise all varieties of bad faith: “everywhere in the world,” he cautions, “the indigenous category for exploitation is ‘reciprocity’” (1972: 134).

Despite Sahlins’s warning, the principle of reciprocity has until recently dominated anthropological discourse about the gift. Consequently, the gift has often been reduced to another form of equivalence that permits theorists to elide inequities of power and blur the myriad forms that exchanges can take. Anthropologists have tended to represent exchanges as dyadic transactions between self-interested persons and downplayed both communal norms and supernatural forms (Parry 1986: 455). As Parry observes, for theorists such as Sahlins and Peter Blau, “the gift is always an ‘Indian gift’ – that is, one ‘for which an equivalent return is expected’ – and the notion of a ‘pure gift’ is mere ideological obfuscation” masking the “supposedly *non*-ideological verity that nobody does anything for nothing” (1986: 455). In other words, ethnography tends to reduce exchange to an “‘objective’ core of an economic truth which seems to correspond more to the observer’s picture of the world than to the practices” under study (Berking 1999: 40). Such economism, as we will see, is the land mine of gift theory. The problem may lie in the assumed definition of selfhood. Whereas Western thought represents exchanges as undertaken by autonomous individuals, in many other societies, as Mauss notes, it is not individuals but groups who carry on exchange, and the persons who exchange do so as representatives of ritualized positions or roles.

How, then, to forge a more useful definition of the obligation to reciprocate? Several social theorists have contested the principle as Mauss presents it. Stephen Gudeman, for example, would displace reciprocity from its central position. He argues that reciprocity “is an expression of community,” but that communal allotment “does not come ‘after’ reciprocity”; rather, “moments of reciprocity or the gift are tokens of existent community” (2001: 467). The gift may extend the commons to outsiders but, Gudeman claims, “reciprocity is never contained within a community.” Rather, the gift is a “probe into uncertainty” aimed at extending the borders of a community (2001: 467). What lies behind reciprocity, for Gudeman, is really status, or what Bourdieu terms “symbolic capital” (Gudeman 2001: 470). But Gudeman’s definition of “community” begs a key question: if reciprocity requires a pre-existent community and is never contained within it, then how are communities formed? What principles create communal



bonds? Later in his essay Gudeman calls a family a community; but if this is so, then his previously-cited assertion must be false, since reciprocity – at least the so-called “generalized” form as described by Sahlins – certainly obtains within many families at some times. Despite leaving these unanswered questions, Gudeman’s essay illuminates the problematic nature of reciprocity, which, he declares, is “not the core of society but its expression. ... [It is] neither a primitive isolate nor the atom of society but its badge.” Hence, “if the gift is an unstable or uncertain category that is only because it is ‘about’ uncertainty itself” (2001: 473).

In other words, some gifts are given altruistically and others are not, and the nature of a transaction may change while it is in progress, or from one prestation to another. It is thus essential to keep in mind that, as Parry reminds us, “Mauss repeatedly stresses a *combination* of interest and disinterest, of freedom and constraint, in the gift” (1986: 456; emphasis in original). Indeed, as both Alain Testart and Derrida point out, if we define the gift as something given without the need for reciprocation, Mauss never discusses the gift at all (Testart 1998: 97; Derrida 1992: 24). Testart further suggests that reciprocity is not at all universal, and that we may represent it more adequately only by distinguishing between various forms of sanction. He proposes a scale running from the least to the most coercive forms of sanction, and further divides them into two groups. In the first group are gifts, which are acts “of someone who provides something without demanding a return.” At the highest end of this group are charitable donations, for which there is no reciprocal obligation; next come invitations to friends, wherein we recognize a feeling of obligation but no sanction; and finally potlatch ceremonies, which involve a social but not a legal sanction. The second group includes transactions that are clearly obligatory: the *kula*, in which a donor can seize from the donee a *kula* object; creditor/debtor relations in Western societies, where a creditor can seize goods or garnishee wages; and creditor/debtor relations in some pre-colonial African societies, where a creditor can seize the person and enslave him or her (Testart 1998: 103–4). Although it is not difficult to criticize Testart’s categories – for example, there clearly *is* an implicit sanction for failure to reciprocate invitations, since in doing so one risks the loss of friendships and a consequent reduction of social capital – his work invites us to refine our definitions of reciprocity. If we do not, writes Testart, we “blur all the difference between gift and exchange” – the very difference we had hoped to assess (1998: 104).

In a densely argued essay first published in 1972 and recently translated into English, Rodolphe Gasché, in the spirit of Derrida, critiques the principle of reciprocity by deconstructing its tropes. Mauss, he argues, regularizes and tames reciprocity by using the figure of the circle (1997: 106). In so doing, he seeks to “master the originary ambiguity” in gift transactions: if one examines the circle, one realizes that it actually undermines Mauss’s delineation of three obligations. That is, the donor of an originating gift would have to be located not on the wheel of circulation but on an immobile point barely touching the circle. Hence, an original donor would not be part of the cycle of exchange because he or she

could not be reciprocating. But if reciprocity is primary, then one cannot first give without at the same time reciprocating (1997: 111). And if this latter is true, then the circle of giving is merely economic, a perfect cycle of gift and counter-gift in which the first prestation is “always already a counter-prestation” (1997: 111). To explain the donor’s gift as a reciprocation is to bring him or her into the circle and thereby eliminate any motive or sanction other than reciprocity and desire for repayment. By this model, there can be no first gift at all. For Gasché as for other theorists, the deeper problem lies in the fiction of the individual self: if the circle of reciprocity exists regardless of the motives of individual givers, then the fixed point of departure – the beginning of the circle – disappears; if the autonomous individual exists prior to the circle of reciprocity, then gifts are merely a disguised form of debt. (Derrida presents these paradoxes in slightly different terms, as we will see below.) In figuring the gift as a circle, then, Mauss reduces it to an economic exchange.

If we accept the trope of the circle, there seems no way out of this dilemma. But perhaps the error lies not in the gift, but in our poetics. Alain Caillé thus submits a different metaphor: the spiral. Caillé suggests that, since the original gift introduces something that was not there before, it cannot be *merely* reciprocal. Further, reciprocity explains why things are given back, but not why one would give back *more* than one receives (Godbout 1998: 132–3). Behind the principle of reciprocity, Caillé concludes, lurks the specter (as Antonio Callari calls it in Chapter 12 of this volume) haunting all accounts of the gift: economism. Until we remove the gift from this shadow, declares Caillé, “we cannot hope to study what lies behind the obligation to reciprocate without seeing a primitive form of the law of book-balancing equivalence, a prefiguring of mercantile reciprocity governed by the law of tit-for-tat, or the first rough versions of contracts” (Godbout 1998: 130). I would go further: to discover the true nature of the gift, we must redirect our gaze from reciprocity toward other principles and motives. When we do, a different set of norms emerges, a set founded upon spontaneity rather than calculation, upon risk instead of reciprocity, upon altruism in place of autonomy.<sup>4</sup>

The essays in the first section of this volume similarly question conventional views of the range and power of reciprocity. They begin the work of dismantling the implicitly economic underpinnings of conventional gift theory. In his opening essay, James Laidlaw focuses upon the practices of Jain renouncers in India to demonstrate persuasively that a truly free gift – that is, one unencumbered by obligation and expectation of reward – not only exists, but also partakes of certain characteristics, such as impersonality, that are usually associated with commodity exchange. Indeed, the social importance of *dan* – the ritual gifts he examines – lies precisely in the fact that they do not create obligations. Next, Yunxiang Yan extends the analysis presented in his book *The Flow of Gifts* (1996) by scrutinizing asymmetrical gifts in rural China. In contrast to Mauss’s contention that in such relations power flows to the donor, Yan demonstrates how the opposite may be true: power flows unilaterally toward the recipient. Finally, Lee Anne Fennell outlines two characteristics of modern gift exchange

that further allow us to reconceive reciprocity: illiquidity and empathetic dialogue. The conversion of cash into illiquid objects, she argues, is aimed at abolishing both the appearance and the existence of calculation. Further, selecting or creating a gift requires donors to engage in an imaginative exercise whereby they empathize with and share recipients' preferences. Fennell's contribution suggests that gift exchanges help to erase boundaries between individuals and to confirm relationships based upon empathy rather than expectation of return. All three of these essays, then, challenge traditional conceptions of balanced reciprocal exchange and the economic assumptions that underwrite them

### ***"Everything speaks"***

Recent anthropological work on the gift has emphasized another principle, one that Mauss acknowledges but never names: inalienability. Mauss does distinguish between different forms of property. Certain objects, he suggests, never move outside of the family, and when they are handed down are surrounded by rituals of great solemnity; these possessions are never really transferred at all, but only lent (1990: 43). Such objects, never fully dissociated from their original owners, are thus said to be *inalienable*: they speak in the specific voice of a person, family, clan or tribe. Chris Gregory and the late Annette Weiner have elaborated on this distinction in their important books. Since I discuss inalienability in detail in my other contribution to this volume, I will merely sketch their ideas here. Inalienable possessions serve as the foundation of the gift system for Gregory, who expands the distinction between alienability and inalienability into an ambitious theory in which gifts and commodities embody two vastly different social systems and visions of identity.<sup>5</sup> For Weiner, inalienable possessions reveal that exchange is predicated upon a universal paradox: "how to *keep-while-giving*" (1992: 5); they thus embody the inherent duality of the gift, which is disinterested and interested at once. In order to understand the nature of gift objects, we must juxtapose them with objects withheld from exchange. Weiner emphasizes the power of inalienable possessions to function as a "force against change" by authenticating origins and kinship histories (1992: 9, 33), and goes so far as to claim that inalienable possessions represent "absolute value" (1992: 42). For Weiner, what motivates reciprocity is really its "reverse – the desire to keep something back from the pressures of give and take" (1992: 43).

Maurice Godelier's recent study, *The Enigma of the Gift* (1999), extends Weiner's discussion of inalienability through a reinterpretation of Mauss. Re-evaluating *hau*, Godelier holds that the inalienability of the gift – that is, its association with a specific person – impels the return gift. If some power lies in the thing itself, it is merely the embodiment of "the relationship which binds it to the person of the giver" (1999: 44). Furthermore, Godelier argues, Mauss (and many of those who followed him) failed to grasp an essential distinction between ownership and possession. In certain rituals – the *kula* among them – an object may be possessed by different hands but is never relinquished by the original

owner; indeed, the more temporary possessors an object has, the greater its value for that first owner. Gifts retain the personhood of their primary owner; thus it is not the object but the owner's identity that drives the object to be returned. Such objects speak in one voice only.

More significantly, Godelier seeks to reinstate the primacy of a fourth obligation that Mauss recognized but did not develop, one that has since been neglected, he argues, to the detriment of anthropology: the obligation to make gifts to gods (1999: 13). By excluding sacred objects from his analysis, Godelier claims, Mauss unintentionally fostered the illusion that exchange was the be-all and end-all of social life, thereby paving the way for the more sweeping secularizations of Lévi-Strauss and his inheritors (Godelier 1999: 69). From this fourth obligation Godelier traces the hierarchical effects of gift giving: since the gods can never be fully repaid, those humans who give the most are elevated to quasi-godlike status (1999: 30). The core principle behind gift exchanges therefore lies in the double nature of gift objects, which are simultaneously "substitutes for sacred objects and substitutes for human beings" (1999: 72). Thus, gift objects are caught between the "inalienability of sacred objects" – those gifts from the gods, heirlooms and kinship markers inextricably linked with tribal or social identities – and "the alienability of commercial objects" – things freely exchanged for profit (1999: 94). Gifts are thus double-voiced, speaking now in the voices of ancestors or divine beings, and now in the neutral tones of mere merchandise.

In contrast to Lévi-Strauss and other anthropologists who describe gift practices in terms of their homological relationship with broader semiotic exchanges, Godelier derives them from myth. For him, then, the gift is religious before it is legal or linguistic; in other words, it is not essentially symbolic but essentially imaginary (1999: 106). Inalienable objects are regarded as such because they constitute an inextricable part of a clan's identity, and thus permit a synthesis of the real and the imaginary, of the secular and the sacred (1999: 120, 138). And yet this synthesis depends upon something else: the concealment of the fact that human beings invent the stories of their beginnings. Sacred objects – inalienable possessions – give us back our own laws, mystified and idealized and therefore brooking no disagreement (1999: 174). "Everything speaks" but some things speak louder than others. Through such privileging, the social imaginary creates a divine sanction for human practices. Hence, the foundation of gift practices in "primitive" societies (and, I would add, in modern societies as well, although here it is more deeply buried) is the need at once to disclose and to deny the superhuman origins of culture. Inalienable objects are sacred because they are said to have been given to humans by gods or ancestors; and yet they require a certain opacity as to their origin in order for society to preserve itself and the myths that engender its identity (1999: 137).

Gifts, then, embody the doubleness of all societies, in which there must be both sacred and profane things, both objects freely exchanged and objects preserved from exchange. To put it another way, we might say that gift practices tell conflicting narratives: on the one hand, they expound a narrative of transfer

and exchange, of hierarchy, aspiration, and freedom from history; and on the other, they retell a narrative of continuity with nature and the past, a story of human interconnectedness and humility before the transcendental. It is this second narrative that has too often been ignored in Western accounts of gift practices, and that any fully satisfactory theory of the gift must seek to restore.

### ***The gift in history***

For his part, Mauss urged his readers to recognize the power of the past and to learn from it. Indeed, much of part three of *The Gift* comprises a historical argument in which Mauss traces an evolution from the system of total prestations that characterized archaic societies to modern societies where the market has supplanted the gift.<sup>6</sup> Mauss seeks to write a “prehistory of our *modern* kind of legal and economic contract” (Parry 1986: 457): a narrative of decline and fall from a world where prestations dominate to one where market and gift are radically divorced. Yet Mauss concludes that vestiges of the archaic principles remain in modern gift practices; hence, “[c]harity is still wounding for him who has accepted it,” and “things sold still have a soul” (1990: 65, 64). In his conclusion, Mauss calls for a return or at least a reconsideration of these practices, urging readers to become more conscious of their connectedness with others.

Later gift theorists have offered other versions of this history. For example, Helmuth Berking, focusing on Germanic cultures and relying heavily on the theories of René Girard, derives modern gifts from the rituals of food distribution performed by ancient hunters. “Before giving, taking and reciprocating, there is slaughtering, taking and distributing,” writes Berking (1999: 52). Rites of distribution sacralized killing and reinforced hierarchy, so that the giving of food became associated with the role of clan chief. As a result, the gift became deeply affiliated with sacrificial practices. According to Berking, the sacred aura that still surrounds gifts finds its origin in primordial violence (1999: 50–70). “Gift exchange and exchange sacrifice belong together, just as the logic of sacrifice is from the beginning inherent in exchange, and the logic of exchange in the sacrifice” (1999: 72).<sup>7</sup>

As a result of the sacralization of food distribution, argues Berking, many of our current gift practices and norms revolve around host/guest relations: the history of the guest is nothing less than a “complete miniature of the anthropology of giving” (1999: 82). The guest functions as the quintessential stranger whose arrival throws everyday practices into question. Thus the stranger is treated as a demigod, but hospitality removes his or her strangeness and thereby reinforces the positive social practices of the host(s). Hence “strangers who might be happily mistreated with impunity are turned into representatives of the ideal values of one’s own group, to be handled with respect, restraint, and ritual distance” (1999: 92). Hosts practice with guests what they have learned in dealings with the gods, thus enabling societies to perform the key transition from religion to civility. In his influential study, Lewis Hyde offers a similar analysis by way of the sanctions on usury, suggesting that Old Testament doctrines permit-

ting usury only outside of the clan were countered by gifts to strangers, which turned others into brothers. The later separation of gift and market, he suggests, is thus accompanied by an inner division in which each man “has a civil and a moral part,” and “the brother and the stranger live side by side in his heart” (1983: 125). The result, for Hyde, is an erosion of the potential for gift giving in civil society, where exchanges instead tend increasingly toward the neutral “balanced reciprocity” described by Sahlins (Hyde 1983: 136).

When the shift from a gift to a market system occurred in Europe is unclear; most theorists trace a gradual shift in the early Modern period, culminating sometime in the eighteenth century. No matter where they mark the dividing line, these histories generally describe a trend that runs this way: “as the economy becomes progressively disembedded from society, as economic relations become increasingly differentiated from other types of social relationship, the transactions appropriate to each become ever more polarized in terms of their symbolism and ideology,” so that now gifts are normally given “with the sole objective of cementing social relations” (Parry 1986: 466–7).<sup>8</sup> Perhaps more important than the commonalities in these historical narratives are their moral conclusions. Virtually all gift theorists echo Mauss, who exhorts us to put back into the “melting pot” all “these concepts of law and economics that it pleases us to contrast: liberty and obligation; liberality, generosity and luxury, as against savings, interest and utility” (1990: 73). Indeed, in the final pages of his monograph Mauss seems to forget what he previously emphasized – that gifts within the system of total prestations were obligatory – to wax nostalgic, claiming that in ancient times “individuals ... were less sad, less serious, less miserly, and less personal than we are. Externally, at least, they were or are more generous, more liable to give than we are” (1990: 81).<sup>9</sup> Only by emulating them, he declares, will modern humans “succeed in substituting alliance, gifts and trade for war, isolation and stagnation” (1990: 82). It is easy to scoff at Mauss’s rueful romanticizing. But placing his work in its historical context – he wrote in the years between two bloody conflicts that tore Europe apart and left millions dead – should give us pause. Have the dominant ideologies of the twentieth century offered more beneficent ways of living? Have they helped to produce more ethically sound human beings, or have they rather increased the disparities between those who have much and those who have little?

## **The ethics of giving**

### *Historical foundations*

To answer, or at least press beyond, these questions we must turn to a different set of theorists and a different history, one deriving not from anthropology but from philosophical ethics. Two traditions (not always in harmony) prevail in philosophical thinking about the gift: the Judeo-Christian and the Greek.<sup>10</sup> The essays in the second section of this volume investigate these ancient and early modern religious and philosophical writings, from which our contemporary

questions draw. First Charles H. Hinnant, focusing on the patriarchal writings of Genesis, shows that even in the earliest biblical texts, gift practices do not adhere to the strict division between the familial and extra-familial forms of reciprocity and exchange outlined by Sahlins and others. Indeed, the gift is treated – both in the events and by the later redactors – as a hybrid form that blends kinship and commodity exchanges.

Hinnant focuses less on the theological than on the social underpinnings of the gift. Theologically, the Judeo-Christian tradition tends to treat all exchanges as versions of the unremittable debt that humans owe to God for the gift of life; all other gifts – whether between kin, between strangers, or between individuals and their own communities – are simply faint echoes of this original endowment. Beyond this, however, the Christian tradition, with its founding narrative of sacrifice and redemption, departs from the Jewish. Christian morality depends upon an ethics of intention wherein the “unreciprocated gift becomes a liberation from bondage ... a denial of the profane self, an atonement for sin, and hence a means to salvation” (Parry 1986: 468). Hence the most noble acts of charity emulate the grace that God dispenses to sinners through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Parry goes on to observe, however, that the Christian ideology of the gift encourages a radical separation between this world and the world to come, resulting in a “*contemptus mundi* which culminates in the institution of renunciation, but of which the charitable gift – as a kind of lay exercise in asceticism – is also often an expression.” Free gifts become the “purchase price of salvation” (1986: 468). Perceiving gifts in this way exemplifies the *ressentiment* that Nietzsche so savagely criticized, in which people practice good works only to buy a ticket to heaven. Still, whether actual Christians think in so calculating a way seems debatable, and this formulation further begs the question of whether gifts are really given without expectation of reward. In contrast, Natalie Zemon Davis argues that, in the Christian rituals practiced in sixteenth-century France, God was never seen to be “obliged” or “grateful” for charitable gifts given in His name; rather, Catholic rituals such as the mass were undertaken with the hopes of appeasing God and inviting mercy (2000: 105). Such rites established for early modern Christians a “model of close gift reciprocity between humans and God” (2000: 109). Nevertheless, Christian – especially Protestant – morality does seem to encourage the same separation of persons and things upon which market exchange depends; perhaps, then, the “ideology of the pure gift may thus itself promote and entrench the ideological elaboration of a domain in which self-interest rules supreme” (1986: 469). That is to say, the ethic of intention is a corollary of the belief in individual salvation. It seems no accident, then, that the emergence of the bourgeois ideology of gift giving occurs nearly concurrently with the Reformation, which rejects priestly intervention for the primacy of the individual’s freely chosen relationship with God. If the foregoing caricatures Christian morality to some degree, it nevertheless exposes certain key problems of the gift: the relationship between gift giving and individual choice and autonomy; the difficulty of removing calculation from charitable actions or religious ceremonies.

Greek thought on gifts probably commences with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In contrast to the Christian tradition, which emphasizes charity, sacrifice and atonement, Aristotle's ethics revolve around political and social standards: friendship, nobility, magnanimity. Aristotle's vision of the "magnanimous" person shapes a political philosophy in which, as Vincent Pecora has shown, the household or *oikos* becomes the model for the polis. Martha K. Woodruff, in the second essay in this section of the present volume, invites a reconsideration of Aristotle's categories as a needed supplement to the modern gift ethics that come to us by way of Nietzsche's "gift-giving virtue." Woodruff argues that Nietzsche's praise for the gift giver creates a dilemma: if everyone emulates Zarathustra in giving excessively, who is left to receive? For Woodruff, Aristotle's description of the friend as "another self" provides an alternative not only to Nietzsche's vision of friendship as competition and challenge, but also to modern conceptions of identity. Aristotle's ethics imagines identity as socially defined, and thus contests the models of autonomous selfhood prevalent in Christian ethics and neoclassical economics. Aristotelian friendship, she argues, combines the seemingly conflicting claims of self-interest and altruism.<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche's praise for magnanimity and wariness about debt may have derived in part from an earlier writer who exerted a powerful influence upon Anglo-American thought: Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>12</sup> In his brief 1844 essay on gifts, Emerson not only recognizes but recommends the affiliation that Mauss described between persons and their presents, declaring that "the only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me" (Emerson 1997: 26). Such a sacrifice, however, demands an equivalent return, one that the recipient may find onerous. Thus the champion of self-reliance admits that "we do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten" (1997: 26). Gifts, Emerson suggests, invade our privacy and demolish our carefully constructed autonomy. The gift is thus a dangerous phenomenon because it involves risk: the risk that one may give without reciprocation; the risk that one may accrue burdensome obligations; the risk that one may never be able to repay a gift; the risk of the loss of freedom. Emerson thus astutely introduces several problems to which later writers on the gift have repeatedly turned: those of gratitude, autonomy, and chance.

In both strains of the Western tradition, generosity and gratitude are represented at once as powerful motivators and as possibly unattainable ideals. In Europe these traditions converge in the Enlightenment, when modern bourgeois identity was constructed along with the ideology of the market. In her essay in this volume, Eun Kyung Min discovers a respect for generosity in an unlikely source from this period: Adam Smith, a writer usually viewed as the chief codifier of modern conceptions of self-interest. Smith's ethics, Min demonstrates, describes gratitude as an interiorized form of commerce in which justice is administered by the authority of "impartial spectators" we create in our own minds. Thus Smith's moral commerce, built upon the key principle of gratitude, is a hybrid construction lying somewhere between the market and the gift.



Perhaps the best known modern discussion of gratitude is that of Georg Simmel, who declares that gratitude is the very foundation of social behavior, the “moral memory of mankind” (1996: 45); without it, society would break apart. Echoing Emerson, however, Simmel also acknowledges the less welcome aspects of gratitude: once one receives a gift, he or she is forever under a coercion to reciprocate. The first gift, for Simmel, can never really be returned, for it has a “freedom which the return gift, because it is *that*, cannot possibly possess” (1996: 47; emphasis in original). Further, Simmel speculates, there has probably never been a reciprocal interaction that was precisely equal. Thus gratitude is irredeemable, and inevitably generates or solidifies power inequities between givers and receivers (1996: 48). And yet, not only do we continue to give gifts, but such giving constitutes perhaps the fullest expression of what it means to be human, embodying a “beauty, a spontaneous devotion to the other, an opening up and flowering from the ‘virgin soil’ of the soul” that at once forges social connections and enacts one’s true freedom (1996: 47–8). Gratitude is both beautiful and dangerous.

Contemporary treatments of the gift revolve around these problems of freedom and autonomy, calculation and spontaneity, gratitude and generosity, risk and power. These questions of the gift are indeed simultaneously ethical questions about the nature and range of obligations; philosophical questions about the nature of human subjectivity; moral questions about the possibility and range of altruism; psychological questions about choice and freedom; and literary questions about our self-representations – about the truth and elasticity of our narratives. Thus all of the thinkers discussed so far address perhaps the primary truth about the gift: its essential ambiguity. Gifts at once express freedom and create binding obligations, and may be motivated by generosity or calculation, or both. Beneath them all lies the unexpressed question, which is perhaps the most fundamental question of all: do gifts exist in the real world, or are they unattainable ideals?

### ***Present impossibilities***

This is the question asked in the most influential recent philosophical inquiry into gifts, Jacques Derrida’s *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1992).<sup>13</sup> Derrida has little to say about the actual practice of gift giving; as usual his concern is rather with sign systems, with those superfluities and paradoxes involved in systems of meaning. Heavily influenced by Nietzsche, Derrida’s writings on the gift conform to his long-term project of exposing the aporias of rational thought, of teasing out the differences and deferrals that inevitably result from the gap between representations and what they represent. Thus Derrida seeks to complicate the relationship between the gift and what he calls, after Georges Bataille, the “restricted” economy of reciprocity. He defines the gift as “that which, in suspending economic calculation, opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry ... and so as to turn aside the return in view of the no-return.” His premise is paradoxical: the gift is impossible; indeed, it is “*the* impossible. The

very figure of the impossible” (1992: 7). Why? Because a gift must be given freely, generously, without the expectation of reward. And yet, at the moment that one even conceives of a certain transaction as a gift, or even conceives of giving something, the thought itself presupposes some reward. The gift is “annulled each time there is restitution or countergift,” and there is inevitably countergift even in the conception (1992: 12). In fact, neither giver nor recipient may even register that there has been a gift, because to do so cancels it: once the donor recognizes that he or she has given a gift, or is thinking of giving a gift, he or she immediately pays him- or herself “with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself” (1992: 14; see also Jenkins 1998: 84).

Like Pierre Bourdieu, whose work I take up below, Derrida suggests that temporal deferral is the essence of the gift. Giving a gift requires forgetting, so that “there could be a gift only at the instant an effraction in the circle will have taken place, at the instant all circulation will have been interrupted and *on the condition* of this instant” (1992: 9; emphasis in original). As Tim Jenkins interprets it, a gift could exist “only as the paradoxical instant where time tears apart” (1998: 84). But how can one forget at the very moment that one intends? How can we fail to recall that we have given a gift, when, as we have noted, gift relationships depend for their existence upon our creation of stories about our transactions and relations? Here, then, is Derrida’s double-bind: “Mauss reminds us that there is no gift without bond, without bind, without obligation or ligature; but on the other hand, there is no gift that does not have to untie itself from obligation, from debt, contract, exchange, and thus from the bind” (1992: 27).

Although he nibbles, gnaws, ruminates upon and recycles this paradox throughout the length of *Given Time*, Derrida never finds his way out of this aporia. Of course, he doesn’t wish to; his aim is rather to expose the limits of rationalism and empiricism, as well as to probe the limits of previous analyses of the gift. The closest he comes to breaking through this logical stalemate occurs near the end of *Given Time*, where he presages, in different terms, the concepts stressed by sociologists such as Godbout and Caillé: the gift “must let itself be structured by the aleatory; it must *appear* chancy or in any case lived as such, apprehended as the intentional correlate of a perception that is absolutely surprised by the encounter with what it perceives” (Derrida 1992: 122). A gift must be unforeseeable and forgotten; “there must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or disorder, and there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must – miraculously, graciously – agree with each other” (1992: 123). A gift without intention, however, is not a gift but an accident. Here Derrida gestures ambiguously toward what other theorists state more plainly – that the gift involves risk and spontaneity. Harnessed to his faith in reason, Derrida may exaggerate the miraculousness of behaviors that human beings perform every day. Indeed, what seems truly impossible here is not actual gift giving but Derrida’s elaborate, complicated version of it.

There are at least two flaws in his rendering. The first is a simple error of description: Derrida's premise is based upon a straw man. Surprisingly, for a philosopher whose entire career has been devoted to overturning conventions and undermining Cartesian selfhood, he adheres to an ideology of the "perfect gift" that, as we have seen, rests upon the belief in the autonomous Western self who chooses rationally and unconstrainedly. Derrida notes that Mauss "speaks of everything but the gift" (1992: 24), but in fact, as we have observed, Mauss clearly recognizes its inherent duality – that it is *both* disinterested and interested at once. Derrida's conundrum, in contrast, is binaristic. The gift is obviously not "impossible," because, in fact, people *do* give, both choosing to do so and responding to the recipient's perceived expectations, while calling what they do giving a gift. *Pace* Derrida (and Bourdieu), human beings are quite capable of simultaneously entertaining conflicting ideas about their behavior. Moreover, the "disinterestedness" in a particular gift may disappear and reappear during the course of one or more transactions. Second, as Philip Mirowski suggests, Derrida seems to equate intention and calculation (2001: 447). One may decide to give a gift, and even reason carefully about the selection, without also calculating expected rewards. Gift givers may also improvise, as when a husband decides on the spur of the moment to buy his wife flowers. Although later he may consider the blessings he might receive in return, in the moment of decision he need not have calculated at all. Spontaneity is a sufficient but not a necessary cause for giving gifts, but incorporating it is a necessary precondition for an adequate definition of the gift.<sup>14</sup>

Derrida's "forgetting" closely resembles Bourdieu's concept of "misrecognition"; each of them leads to the conclusion that giving gifts involves bad faith, that we lie to ourselves by choosing to ignore or forget our calculation of self-interest; that the pleasure we gain in giving gifts is just self-gratification. Although his own analysis of the gift betrays related flaws (as discussed below), Bourdieu has recently pointed to the requirements for transcending these Derridean double-binds: "it is not possible to reach an adequate understanding of the gift without leaving behind both the philosophy of mind that makes conscious intention the principle of every action and the economism that knows no other economy than that of rational calculation and interest reduced to economic interest" (1997: 234). For Bourdieu, the gift is "an act situated beyond the opposition between constraint and freedom, individual choice and collective pressure, distinterestedness and self-interest" (1997: 236). To understand the gift we must employ what Keats called "negative capability": the capacity to entertain conflicting thoughts or interpretations without seeking to resolve them neatly. Gifts expose the truth that human behavior and the stories with which we dramatize it are more flexible than the rational theories with which we attempt to account for it. The meanings of the gift, in short, expose the limitations of our categories. Hence, more adequate descriptions of its meanings will require that theorists become flexible enough to embrace and emulate the gift's own elasticity.

## The sociology of the gift

### *Good and bad gifts*

Current social thought, which maps and explores the territories where gifts operate, may move us toward such flexibility. Sociologists have gathered a wealth of information to assess whether contemporary human beings are indeed, as Mauss charges, less generous, less socially bound, and more miserly than “primitives.” However, two different interpretations of gift practices coexist uneasily in sociological discourse. In one camp are those adhering to what Aafke Komter dubs the “moral cement” approach. These theorists emphasize the unifying effects of gift giving, gifts’ capacity to forge or solidify social bonds. In the other camp are those who stress the ways that gifts can be used to acquire and exercise power; these writers emphasize inequality and social disintegration (Komter 1996a: 107).

In the first group we find sociologist David Cheal, who uses data gleaned from Canadian communities to argue that gifts participate in and create what he terms a “moral economy”: “a system of transactions which are defined as socially desirable ... because through them social ties are recognized, and balanced social relationships are maintained” (1988: 15; see Chapter 12 of this volume for further treatment of Cheal’s work). Cheal espouses the gift system; yet in his theory gifts never really threaten the dominant market economy partly because for him (as for Hyde) the gift is an economy of small groups (Cheal 1998: 16; Hyde 1983: 89). In contrast to the neutralized exchanges of the marketplace, for Cheal gifts contribute to what he (unfortunately) calls “love culture,” because in giving gifts transactors empathize with each other and see the world through another’s eyes (Cheal 1996: 105). However, Cheal does not stress, as does Lee Anne Fennell, the dialogic aspects of gift giving and receiving, whereby the selves interacting in such transactions are also reconfigured through them. Thus he ends up limiting both the range and the value of the gift and risks trivializing what he attempts to endorse.

Komter’s research reveals similar findings. She concludes that, despite most givers’ belief that they are acting altruistically, balanced reciprocity remains the most common paradigm for gift transactions, and that mixed motives – both generosity and a desire to be recognized – generally characterize both gift givers and receivers (1996a: 110, 117). Contemporary gift giving is, we see again, decidedly ambivalent. One reason may be that, as Berking suggests, nowadays people who give feel the need to justify themselves in terms of the dominant ideology of self-interest. For example, let’s say I invite a new colleague over to my house for dinner. I clean the house, prepare a costly dinner, buy new place-mats, and purchase expensive wine. Why do I unproductively spend resources which I could use to increase my wealth and comfort? I could argue that I want to make the acquaintance feel welcome, to treat her as I would wish to be treated if I were she. But Berking discovered that many Westerners would frame their motives differently. To the question, “Why did you invite the friend?” they answer, “Because it gives me self-fulfillment: I can increase my self-esteem, feel

rewarded, and perhaps create good will and obligations that I can exploit in the future” (1999: 145). Contemporary Westerners are so uncomfortable with communalism and altruism that we tend to re-explain our generosity as self-interest. In such cases, our stories fail to account for the complexity of our motives. Instead we remold connected selves into isolated consumers, and replace collective obligations with individualist gratifications.

In the second camp are those for whom collective obligations are sources of power, or what Bourdieu dubs “symbolic capital.” We might call this The *Godfather* Paradigm: when I give more to you or perform extravagant favors for you, I both enhance my prestige and engender deep obligations. This, of course, is the principle behind the potlatch. In contemporary societies, as Barry Schwartz observes, personal gifts may likewise be hostile or presumptive: because a gift is imbued with the identity of its giver and codifies the giver’s perception of the recipient(s), to accept a gift is to allow someone else to impose that version of self upon you (1996: 70). Such gifts may indeed be “offers you can’t refuse.” Likewise, to refuse a gift – if the offer can be refused – is to reject the identity imposed as well as the tendered relationship it involves. Theorists such as Schwartz demonstrate that gift exchanges not only promote reciprocity but also protect hierarchies.

Let’s use another story to exemplify some of the nuances in reciprocal exchanges. A longstanding friendship between couples is waning: the couples find they have fewer and fewer interests in common and have neglected to maintain the social exchanges – invitations, conversations, jokes – that nourish friendships. Yet Couple A insists upon continuing to give extravagant birthday presents and ceremonial gifts to Couple B. Couple B feels obligated to reciprocate, but invariably grumbles and procrastinates in doing so. Because of their gifts, Couple A continues to ask for favors, such as the use of Couple B’s car, and still keeps borrowed CDs for months, while also resenting the implied disrespect in Couple B’s delays. Finally Couple B does not return a phone call, and fails to reciprocate for a birthday present. Here the refusal of reciprocity sends a clear signal that may create a hostility as persistent as the *Godfather*’s extorted gratitude. Not so clear, however, are the accompanying signals: Will Couple A understand Couple B’s implication that they find Couple A’s “gifts” to be manipulative? Or will they just accuse them of ingratitude? Is Couple B accusing Couple A of extortion when in fact they are merely inconsistent? Is Couple A seeking to outdo Couple B in extravagance because they feel diminished by Couple B’s loss of interest in the relationship? The parties in this relationship are telling conflicting stories and living by conflicting interpretations of their reciprocal exchanges and the balance of power. This case highlights the fact that reciprocal exchanges are not always friendly, even among friends. Indeed, taken to its furthest expression, the “norm” of reciprocity may encompass vengeance, in which repayment for a service rendered or not rendered becomes violent or destructive. This is the gift as poison. But even within relationships that remain generally amicable, gifts can generate exploitation, manipulation, and a battle for control. Thus one fears that the friendship described above will end only when one of the couples denounces the other.

## Gender

Theorists in both camps agree that women still dominate gift rituals. For Cheal, gift giving is an essential component of a “feminized ideology” of love (1996: 97). Godbout and Caillé similarly declare that the gift is “the special domain” of women (Godbout 1998: 36), and Lewis Hyde proposes that gifts comprise a “female property” (1983: 103). Hyde fails to emphasize, however, the other meaning of his phrase: the degree to which females *are* or *have been* the property of males. Lévi-Strauss argues, in fact, that historically women have not just given gifts but have *been* gifts, and indeed that the exchange of women by men constitutes the very origins of culture (1997: 24).<sup>15</sup> The source of this affiliation between gift and gender may lie in the historical separation of spheres, whereby males operate in the wider marketplace of commodity and price and leave the domestic realm to women. French feminists such as Hélène Cixous have suggested that the “feminine” economy is essentially connected with the gift, and that this economy provides a needed libidinal alternative to the intrinsically “male” economy of debt (1981: 48–55). Such questionable essentialism aside, the more common feminist response has been to interpret women’s association with gifts as a sign of oppression: that is, women have greater freedom and power in a domain that is ultimately trivial; furthermore, by fostering the illusion of control, this condition prevents women from seeking more authentic pathways to power. Yet another interpretation is possible: that women use gifts to establish and confirm networks of social obligation that engender true social influence. Who benefits, then, from the affiliation between women and gifts? Is it a sign of impotence or of power appropriated?

Komter outlines four possible ways that women’s role in gift exchanges could be related to power. This affiliation may: (1) create asymmetrical power in favor of men; (2) generate equivalent reciprocity, whereby each gender benefits equally; (3) produce asymmetrical reciprocity in favor of women; or (4) engender a condition of alternating asymmetry, in which women and men profit in turn (1996b: 124). In the first model, gift giving is presented as involuntary labor that confirms women’s position of inferiority. Men disdain these transactions because they are insignificant. In the second model, women’s gifts and the social interconnections they establish create an alternate economy equivalent to that of males (1996b: 126). In many societies, for example, women perform the essential rituals surrounding birth and death, and these symbolically rich functions are just as indispensable to the smooth functioning of society as male trade. In the third model, women actually show their superiority in matters of emotion through the giving and receiving of gifts; they also establish deeper and longer-lasting friendships, thereby promoting social stability and support through female bonding. In the fourth model, models one and three alternate: women and men benefit equally, if in different ways and at different times, from women’s status as greater gift givers (1996b: 129). Komter concludes that model four best describes social reality, and it seems true that women’s affiliation with the gift economy offers important benefits for both genders.<sup>16</sup>

But it is not clear how this conclusion avoids the pitfall of tacitly approving a separation of spheres that seems inevitably to ascribe a higher value to market

transactions than to gifts. To accept a rigid gendering of the gift, that is, may ensure that gifts remain beyond the pale of mainstream economic thought and activity, and that the moral economy dominated by women will continue to be marginalized. Thus for Komter women's gift giving is involved in a fundamental paradox:

on the one hand, their gift exchange may be considered a powerful means of reconstituting social identities and of keeping social relationships alive. ... On the other hand, in giving much to others, women incur the risk of losing their own identities, given their unequal societal and economic power compared with men.

(Komter 1996b: 130–1)

Here again the gift is understood as an ambiguous phenomenon, both embodying the connectedness that fosters social strength and cohesion and enacting a form of disenfranchisement, an “alternate” economy, that is granted value only after the fact, as a tributary of the channels where real power flows.

### ***Two economies***

The consideration of separate spheres is related to another question of the gift that has been posed repeatedly in sociological studies: are current gift practices a continuation of ancient ones, or do gifts represent something entirely different for us than for the ancients? These historical alternatives imply different degrees of separation between the domains of home and work: if the gift is something different for us than for ancient people, this condition seems to be both a cause and a result of the increasing divorce between the domestic realm and the realm of business. In contrast, if contemporary gift practices are merely evolved versions of ancient ones, then the two realms interpenetrate in a myriad of ways. The problem with the first formulation is, as Alan Smart has noted, that it ends up trivializing or ghettoizing the gift; yet the second interpretation threatens to dissolve differences and offer weak resistance to economic explanations (Smart 1993: 389).

Still, the second alternative seems intuitively true. For example, let's say I buy produce from a man who brings fruit and vegetables into the neighborhood in his truck. Although his prices are generally lower than those in supermarkets, quite often his grapes are soft and his oranges dry. One could argue that the transactions retain a vestige of the gift because the man delivers to our home; they involve a personal relationship as well as an economic one. An economist might argue, in contrast, that we are simply calculating costs: the value we receive from home delivery and lower prices outweighs the risk that his produce will be stale. Thus we are simply getting more for our money. But this explanation fails to account for what is most important in this relationship. We continue to give him our custom, not for convenience's sake (since we visit the supermarket every week, it would actually be more convenient to buy produce there

than to leave a note for him), but because over the years we have come to know and respect this man. A small businessman, we feel, needs our custom more than the supermarket chain does; perhaps more importantly, his personal attention contrasts starkly with the gleaming, sterile ambience of the supermarket. His presence and good humor make the world seem a friendlier place. Consequently, his fruit and vegetables seem less alienated; because our beans were *his* beans, they seem more natural, as well. And although we pay full price for the produce, because it carries our grocery man's stamp it bears a kind of weak inalienability. Here, then, the domain of the gift and the sphere of the market cross paths and may converge. Nevertheless, this relationship remains an exception to the way that we purchase virtually all other products, for there is no hint of the gift when we line up at the local Giant.

The separation and interaction between these realms and their accompanying objects – gifts and commodities – constitutes the major theme of James Carrier's recent study. Carrier provides a nuanced treatment of this separation and suggests that different models of gift exchange bring with them different models of selfhood. He shows how the ideology of the "perfect gift" – in which gifts are seen as unconstrained and unconstraining – emerges from, and may foster, economism (1995: 149; I discuss this further in Chapter 12). That is, conceiving that the desire to give gifts issues from some "pure" impulse of generosity and entails no obligation really assumes that gift givers are the same disinterested, autonomous individuals found in economists' models. Accordingly, in this view presents are "transubstantiated in a kind of reverse fetishism of commodities," losing their past – that indissoluble attachment to persons that Mauss articulated – to act as fungible expressions of fleeting encounters (Carrier 1995: 166). Contemporary depictions of gifts as free and unconstrained merely import the autonomous self of neoclassical economics into another terrain. Although the ideal of the "perfect" or free gift is very rarely carried out in practice, the ideology remains, and may prevent donors and recipients from understanding their own motives and actions. We feel guilt that our gifts are sometimes given with strings attached, and pretend that we alone are altruistic; as a result, we trip on the kind of logical paradoxes presented by Derrida: "pure" gifts are impossible, yet we continue to give something that we call gifts. Gifts and commodities, or gift transactions and market relations, are thus for Carrier "polar terms that define a continuum along which one can place existing transactions and friendships" (1995: 190). They overlap. Thus we need a richer description of identity, something akin to what Carrier dubs the "situated self," in order to define subjects not as trapped by but as produced by the web of relationships that gifts promote. Although Carrier himself cannot give up his investment in the autonomous individual, he does demonstrate the difficulty of reconceiving selfhood, as well as the dangers inherent in an uncritical championing of the gift as a pure ideal of free, unconstrained giving.

Jacques T. Godbout and Alain Caillé similarly define the gift as the embodiment of a "system of relationships that is strictly social, in that these relations cannot be reduced to factors of power or economic interest" (Godbout 1998: 13).



But the gift fails to play the major role in society that it could. Why? For three reasons: because the gift is defined as the antidote to the market, and is thus “burdened with the impossible task of embodying absent hope and the lost soul in a soulless world” (1998: 165); because the gift requires a break with both ideologies of self-interest and Nietzschean egoism; and because, as we have seen, modernity prides itself on a ferocious individualism that mistrusts selflessness (1998: 16–17). According to Godbout and Caillé, family life nourishes the gift by creating support mechanisms, by compelling reciprocal services, by linking generations through inalienable possessions, and by performing gift rituals such as weddings (Godbout 1998: 48). But this definition assumes the separation of spheres. Thus, while Godbout and Caillé’s ratification of the gift rebuts neoclassical analyses of the family (such as Gary Becker’s), their retention of the radical separation of gift and market once again restricts the gift’s range and deepens the very rift whose existence they lament.

They attempt to escape this problem by analyzing what they call “the gift to strangers.” These are not Berking’s host-guest relations, although they may derive from them. Instead they are referring to support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, in which strangers (and the carefully preserved anonymity of such groups is designed to maintain that “strangeness”) give each other the gifts of sympathy and conversation, and to charitable organizations, which connect individuals through usually anonymous gifts to those in need (Godbout 1998: 64–77). The phenomenon of “gifts to strangers” is “quintessentially modern” because these presents are not circumscribed by primary obligations such as family or friendship (1998: 77). The “gifts to strangers,” unlike the kin-based gifts in earlier societies, depend for their efficacy on a degree of impersonality.

Godbout and Caillé outline other features that characterize the modern gift as well, but the most important of these is spontaneity (Godbout 1998: 96–7; cf. Caillé 2001: 34). This feature, too often neglected in gift theory, is a signpost toward a possible route out of the dilemma of self-interest. The gift, as Gudeman aptly notes, is a “probe into uncertainty” (2001: 467): a giver never truly knows whether he or she will receive anything back. Giving must therefore be to some degree its own reward. But two problems attend this phenomenon. The first is what Godbout and Caillé dub the “Dale Carnegie paradox”: in order to win friends and influence people, one must treat them respectfully and act spontaneously sincere. When one sincerely cares for others, one finds oneself receiving rewards of respect and compassion in return. Thus habitual gift givers end up cultivating sincerity. Yet to cultivate sincerity would seem to ensure insincerity; likewise, “practicing spontaneity” seems oxymoronic (Godbout 1998: 79–80). The second problem is a social paradox. Gifts should be given spontaneously. But people value them so much that they tend to make them obligatory in certain circumstances, and creating such obligations seems to deny the gift its essence, its voluntary quality (1998: 142). The Dale Carnegie paradox resembles Derrida’s impossibility, which rests, as I have suggested, upon a mistaken notion of how gifts really operate, and upon a binaristic way of thinking that gifts render inadequate. The second paradox also seems founded upon an erroneous