

THE MOVEMENT OF GIFT
Owning, Giving and Sharing in Religious Perspective

by

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SUMMARY

The theme of *gift* has in recent years been subject to considerable commentary in diverse disciplines including philosophy, anthropology, sociology, religious studies and literary criticism. The vast majority of these studies focus on how or whether *gift* can be differentiated from *exchange*.

In this dissertation I maintain that *gift* is a form of giving and receiving that is distinct from exchange or commerce, and that it need not create an obligation to return or reciprocate. This gift is given unilaterally to the need of the other and results in relatedness rather than indebtedness.

This essay considers the characteristics of exchange and of gift, then reviews the thought of five writers on giving/receiving and reciprocation. This is followed by an overview of the gift theme in African Traditional Religion and the Judaic and Christian traditions, and a concluding chapter summarising thoughts on gift and self-interest, sharing, need, and gratitude.

Key Terms

African Traditional Religion; Creation Accounts; Donation; Exchange; Generosity; Gift; Gift Exchange; Ownership; Reciprocity; Sharing.

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Preface

I was first drawn to the subject of gifts through exposure to the work of Lewis Hyde¹ in 1982. At the time I was involved in the administration of service and community development programmes in Africa. Hyde's work may have appealed to me especially because it seemed to suggest an alternative paradigm – that of gift – by which to understand and redefine relationships of giving and receiving. I was at the time weary of the mechanically reciprocal and increasingly contractual gospel of development.² In such a climate I found the promise of the gift motif liberating, non-violent, and expansive.

Since that time I have remained attentive to a variety of conversations about gifts and giftgiving, and have tried to re-comprehend life and the world through this lens. In the process I have become less and less certain about what gift is and isn't, and how it works. It is an elusive thing that – almost inherently – objects to being defined, owned and tied down. I welcome this occasion to share the uncertainty I have discovered, but also some of the things about gift sharing that I have learned.

Much of the anthropological, religious, and especially philosophical writing on the subject of *gift* and gift “exchange” is – I believe unnecessarily – obscure and difficult to understand by persons of normal intelligence. This is not so much due to the real complexity of the concepts involved, but

¹Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

²At the time development theory was still largely in reaction to a corrupted gift motif represented by relief aid and “charitable” responses. As a result it coopted many of the right noises – community based, participatory – but was so compelled by the vision of “developing” (modernising? westernising?) societies that it continued to perpetuate a view of the world which saw a vast arena of need in the global South, and a vast capacity for responding in the global North. In the wake of the disappointing results of the development decades of the sixties and seventies, the early eighties were a time of search and reflection on possible new directions. Since that time a contractualist bias – which suggests that much if not all of what needs to happen can be cast in terms of reciprocal relationships – has gained favour.

(in my view) because of writing styles that encourage and reward obfuscation and the cloaking of meaning, and in which the use of insider vocabularies abounds. I have tried hard to avoid such language in this essay because the subject is not in fact an esoteric one, and because I believe it can be presented in an accessible way.

Does gift “matter”? Obviously I believe it does, even though much of what has been written on gift seems determined to convince us otherwise. As creative and stimulating – even enjoyable – as many of the philosophical and sociological conversations on gift are, they often seem preoccupied with complex and intangible constructs that are essentially closed systems, protected in all directions by absolutist language, that fix and categorise gift – even while proclaiming its elusiveness, and in the process contradicting all of our common intuitions about gift.³ Other writers ignore or deny any fundamental distinction between gift and exchange, thereby reducing gift to an interesting artefact in the historical development of capitalistic and other systems of economic exchange.⁴

Gift matters precisely because it is a paradigm of ultimate weakness – always yielding – in a global culture where the firmly defined and categorised paradigms of power and strength based on false equations of exchange and *quid pro quo*/revenge/retribution lead only to conflict, domination, rupture, death, and destruction. Gift matters because it does not demand; it does not engender

³Consider, for example, this quote from Derrida: “As the *condition* for a gift to be given, this forgetting *must be* radical not only on the part of the donee but first of all, if one can say here first of all, on the part of the donor. It is also on the part of the donor “subject” that the gift not only *must not be* repaid but *must not be* kept in memory, retained as symbol of a sacrifice, as symbolic in general. For the symbol immediately engages one in restitution. To tell the truth, the gift *must not* even appear or signify, consciously or unconsciously, as gift for the donors, whether individual or collective subjects.” (Emphasis added.) Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kyeemagh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 23.

⁴Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. WD Halls (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1990). Mauss is discussed further in chapter 4.

absolutism or imperative; instead it constantly opens, allowing itself to be coopted and corrupted, defined and redefined, always creating possibility. Gift matters because while from the dominant viewpoint of exchange it is unreasonable and uneconomic, in the broader context of life and the universe it seems the only imaginable way. Gift matters because it is where all life comes from, and because it exposes, feeds, and feeds upon the interrelatedness of everyone and everything. Gift matters because it is what surrounds us; it is such an available option; it can always be accepted or offered at no cost. It is like a word that can always be spoken, or not. Gift matters because – with all due respect to Jacques Derrida – it is so possible, and so much “the possible.”⁵ Perhaps most of all, gift matters because when attention is paid to it, and when it is recognised as everywhere present, one can understand oneself and others as prolific givers, and thus be more in touch with the movement of life, God,⁶ and the universe. Tuning in to the gift paradigm, and seeing ourselves as a part of the flow of gifts, instructs and constructs our intentions, our visions, our connections, our relationships, and the world through which we move.

It is appropriate that “Africa” has served as the context for these reflections. As it happens

⁵To be fair, Derrida’s point on the impossibility of gift has generally been misunderstood. In his own words: “I tried to precisely displace the problematic of the gift, to take it out of the circle of economy, of exchange, but not to conclude, from the impossibility for the gift to appear as such and to be determined as such, to its absolute impossibility. I said, to be very schematic and brief, that it is impossible for the gift to appear as such. So the gift does not exist as such, if by existence we understand being present and intuitively identified as such. So the gift does not exist and appear as such; it is impossible for the gift to exist and appear as such. But I never concluded that there is no gift. I went on to say that if there is a gift, through this impossibility, it must be the experience of this impossibility, and it should appear as impossible. The event called gift is totally heterogeneous to theoretical identification, to phenomenological identification. That is a point of disagreement. The gift is totally foreign to the horizon of economy, ontology, knowledge, constative statements, and theoretical determination and judgment. But in doing so, I did not intend to simply give up the task of accounting for the gift, for what one calls gift, not only in economy but even in Christian discourse. . . . I never said that there is no gift. No. I said exactly the opposite. What are the conditions for us to say there is a gift, if we cannot determine it theoretically, phenomenologically? It is through the experience of the impossibility; that its possibility is possible as impossible.” John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 59-60.

⁶I will use “God” as generally inclusive of God, god, the gods, except when a more precise term is required.

much of my own understanding of gifts I first received from “Africa” and Africans. The relationship between gift and gratitude is another whole story,⁷ but in any event, I am grateful.

⁷ See chapter 5.

Introduction

“In the history of ethics there is a downright fear of what cannot be subjected to rules and regulations. Again and again thinkers have undertaken to define altruism in such a way that it remains rational. This, however, is never done except at the cost of the naturalness and living quality of ethics.” (Albert Schweitzer)

In all of the philosophical, religious, social and anthropological discussions of gift, there is really a single issue being debated. This is the question of reciprocity or return, the relationship of gift and exchange. In other words, is giftgiving simply another form of exchange, where something must come back to the giver in response to the gift? Or is it possible for gifts to be given/received freely, without any necessary reciprocal action? Is a gift necessarily given *in exchange* for something subsequently or previously received? If so, in what sense is it really a gift? The issue is then easily reduced to the tedious and pedantic debate of whether among human beings any motive other than self interest is possible for any act.⁸

This question is ambiguous not only in academic contexts but also in the average person's views of gifts. While understandings of gifts surely differ from culture to culture, it would probably be safe to say that the core ambiguity of gifts is present in most if not all cultures. In common usage, *gift* is distinguished from buying and selling, from trade and barter, in that it is assumed to be excessive, above and beyond what is necessary or required in a moral sense. If someone were asked the question “what is a gift?” it could be confidently expected that the response would include such concepts as “it is something given or received freely or voluntarily, something that is not required”; “it is given/received without strings attached, without compensation”; “it is something

⁸See Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory,” *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Aafke E. Komter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996) 148-163.

given/received that is not bought/sold”; “it is something extra, unnecessary”; and so forth. In short, gift is clearly understood as something that happens which is apart from, or outside of, or other than any commerce or economy by which goods, services, or other intangibles are given or received through some kind of exchange.

At the same time, it is also true – in direct contradiction to the above – that ordinary people in diverse cultures understand that in some degree to receive a gift is to incur debt, and to become beholden to the giver. Gifts are often viewed with some circumspection or even suspicion. The most innocent response to a gift, such as “how can I thank you enough?” or “how can I ever repay you?” suggests some kind of understanding that reciprocity – exchange – commerce – is involved. This by all logic contradicts the idea of gift being without strings attached.

The issue of debate, then, is whether this fundamental perception of gift as free, uncompensated, etc. is purely subterfuge, deliberate or innocent self-deception, and whether in fact it is possible to give or receive anything outside of an expectation or assumption, or outside of the reality, that what is given or received must be “paid back” – either in concrete material terms or in some less visible way – such as through added prestige or honour, a sense of indebtedness, etc.

It is clear that gift is understood in many different ways, and that therefore it will have many different and even contradictory definitions. I am not interested in making the case that some of these are correct and others wrong, or that some are the *real* gift and others are false. But I do want to show that among the diverse versions and definitions of gift, a gift that is free of exchange, free of reciprocity, free of obligation and coercion does exist, can be both imagined and observed, and is thus possible.

The thesis of this paper is that *this* gift can be distinguished from all of those processes of

giving and taking that focus primarily on value, ownership, indebtedness, and exchange. It is addressed and attracted to the need of the other. It is not an economy or a commerce. It creates relatedness rather than debt, and it does not obligate a return. My thesis takes issue with those definitions or descriptions of gift and the working of gift that make exclusive and absolutist pronouncements and claims, denying any possibility of gift that is not exchange.

Not only is there such a thing as giving and receiving outside the confines of debt, ownership and commerce, it is in fact an everyday occurrence, and even more, an everyday possibility and an everyday necessity. There is indeed such a thing as gift – gift that is possible – and it stands in stark contrast to exchange and reciprocity, however much it may be smothered and perverted by the overpowering and pervasive modern metaphor of commerce and exchange. Finally, not only is gift real and possible, it is also highly desirable and needed as an alternative to the various economies and exchange systems that would price out all conceivable aspects of life and change them into transactions based on ownership and exchange value.

Many of those who consider these questions do so without acknowledging the myriad ways in which all are captive to, and cannot think outside of, an exchange mentality. To a large degree those who reflect upon the theme of gift do so as rabid exchangers. Exchange or reciprocity is seen as “the way things are,” and it is given something of the quality of natural law. It goes well beyond economics and the market, which provide the basic metaphors for exchange, and resides also in understanding of justice, of rights, of science, and of religion. Indeed religion, which from one perspective could be said to be the true home of the gift, instead both in theory and in practice embeds ever more deeply the view that no gift goes unrewarded.

As I examine this subject further it should be noted, as suggested above, that if it is true that

gift is always reciprocated, then there is probably no such thing as gift. Gift then becomes a commodity, merely a superficially distinguished variant of exchange, of trading, buying and selling, and can be of very limited interest except as a segment on an exchange continuum. In sum, it is only the assumption that gift *is* distinct from and stands in contrast to exchange and reciprocity that can make it a subject of profound interest. This means that it is important to establish from the beginning what, as exactly as possible, is meant in this paper by the term “gift.” The initial chapter of this essay will consider and elaborate key characteristics of gift.

Second, exchange – like gift – is embedded in profound mythologies, having to do with possession, ownership, value, and concepts of equality, balance, and justice. For example, the market is seen as the epitome of exchange, and it is assumed that the market is about equivalence; that is, that if one pays a given price one receives an *equivalent* return. In fact there is never equivalence in exchange. A loaf of bread is not “equal to” R. 3.50 or any other “price.”

But even more profoundly, the market is not only about equivalence, it is also about gain or profit. If it were about balance, exchange would be without purpose, and no accumulation or wealth could result from it. Exchange and self conscious reciprocity is nearly always about accumulation of one kind or another because it focusses on self interest and what I will receive in return, leaving the other to be concerned about what she or he will receive from me. Gift is to dispersal and letting go as exchange is to accumulation and holding on. Our concept of “fairness” is a constraint on exchange, but it is not exchange itself.

Because gift is normatively treated as a variant of exchange, and because this essay takes issue with that view, chapter two will critique the inadequacy of exchange paradigms, and their relationships to ownership, value, and gift.

Third, as already noted the extent of our captivity by the reciprocity and exchange paradigms is not adequately acknowledged. I deliberately use the plural “paradigms” because the understandings of exchange/reciprocity are varied and imprecise. What is notable in this is that writers who are eager to demonstrate that so-called gift has to do with reciprocity and exchange uncritically equate virtually any post-gift movement whatsoever – anything that happens after the gift is given – with return and therefore with exchange. In the third chapter I will critique a variety of writers on gift – focussing on Marcel Mauss, Lewis Hyde, Jacques Derrida, Steven Webb, and Genevieve Vaughan – in terms of the reciprocity/exchange theme.

Fourth, it could be said that economic life is fundamentally about exchange and religion fundamentally about gift. It is thus ironic that in economic life, the language of exchange goes out of its way to disguise commodity as gift, while in the context of religion, the language of theology goes out of its way to disguise gift as commodity. The entire thrust of advertising attempts to convince potential buyers that in fact in the market they can get something for nothing, or nearly so. “No money down,” “zero percent financing,” “pay nothing until January,” “buy one get one free,” “free gift with every purchase”; such phrases are the staples of advertising. Often it seems that the more unremarkable the quality of the product, the more issues of relative quality, let alone need, are ignored in favour of the idea that what consumers are begged to purchase is practically a gift.

Meanwhile religion, arguably the true home of the gift, consistently devalues gift by insisting that it is reciprocated. “Do unto others *as you would have them do unto you*,” the Christian *Golden Rule*, brings ethics into the market place, suggesting that our gifts should be calculated on the basis of return. More blatantly, religious texts and traditions promise that ethical acts – gifts – toward others will all be compensated, if not in this life then in the next. One can justifiably ask

whether this is in part because religious texts and traditions are interpreted through eyes that belong to the world of exchange. But in any case, it is difficult to make the case that religion is not, in a relatively essential way, about fundamental, original givenness, even though one of the ways that givenness is interpreted by religion is in terms of reciprocity. In the fourth chapter I will specifically consider the religious foundation of gift, and in the process I will try to distinguish the essential religious nature of gift from its various exchange disguises.

The final chapter of this essay is a reflection on how gift can be extracted from exchange, how people can live lives of giftgiving and receiving, and what difference living in such a way might make.

Chapter 1: All is Gift

. . . there is no other without the gift. To give and to open oneself to the existence of others is the same thing. What the gift gives is the other. (Jean-Joseph Goux)

All is gift. The *gift* quality is essential to – of the essence of – all things. This is because every imaginable “thing” – including thoughts, words, actions, capacities, as well as physical objects – comes “originally” from outside of any marketplace, from outside of any system of trade or exchange. Exchange begins when gifts offered are possessed and removed from gift circulation.

Freedom and Contradiction

I believe that a study of gift or gifts should begin – even before attempting to define the term – with a consideration of some of the special characteristics of gift that make definition confusing and perhaps even impossible.

First, it should be clear that when I speak of a gift I am in fact speaking of two distinct aspects. One is the “thing” itself that is given as a gift, the second is the giving of the thing in such a way that it is a gift. Jean-Joseph Goux, writing of Seneca’s essay *De Beneficiis* (“On the Kind Deed,” which I believe may be interpreted as “On Gift”) notes that for Seneca this distinction is crucial. “Yet it is this intention that constitutes the essence of the kind deed, because it is only the intention that is good when something is given, and not the object itself, as a material thing.”⁹ This suggests that any thing – or idea, person, act – can be a gift or not depending upon how I look at it, how I as a giver intend it. Likewise how I as receiver – or as a third party observer – perceive, feel, or interpret something given can make it a gift, or not. The determination that a gift has “happened”

⁹“There is a huge difference between the matter of the [gift] and the [gift] in itself; therefore it is not the gold, nor the silver, nor any of the most magnificent things that constitute the [gift], but the sole intention of the one who gives.” Jean-Joseph Goux, “Seneca against Derrida: Gift and Alterity,” *The Enigma of Gift and Sacrifice*, eds. Edith Wyschogrod, Jean-Joseph Goux and Eric Boynton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 153.

can be made independently by each of these “*T*”s, regardless of the intention or understanding of the giver or receiver.

For example, suppose John sees Maria give William a book. Each of the three may understand the book as a gift – or not – quite independent of the action/reaction of the others. Maria may feel and even say to William that she is simply repaying a debt – or creating one, or making a loan; but regardless, William may nevertheless consider that he has received the book as a gift (or not). As a third party John may perceive that a gift has been given and/or received, independent of how Maria or William feel or express themselves about it.

It is easy to see that there is nothing that is gift “in itself.” Suppose Rachel gives a present – a flower – to Jean. There is nothing about the flower that makes it a gift. It can readily be identified as a gift only in the context of seeing or knowing that Rachel gives it to Jean, and that she gives it in a certain way, with a certain intention. To say that the flower is a gift, then, is to say that the flower is understood by the giver and/or receiver to be related in a special way to Jean and Rachel; it is this context all together, and nothing inherent in the flower, that allows the flower to be gift.¹⁰

Second, in a related sense a gift can be given or received even when there is no known recipient or giver. Perhaps this is most obvious in the artistic realms – in which an artist “offers up” a musical or other work as a gift (to whom?), or, an artist is said to have (received) a “real gift” (from whom?) – but in fact the same phenomenon is quite commonplace and everyday among ordinary people. One might say “that day was a special gift to me,” or “the idea occurred to me.”

Finally, gift is not dependent upon issues of possession. If I am walking past a flower it can be a gift to me – or even a gift from me – even if I never possess it, but merely think it into some

¹⁰This question of intention has very significant implications for gift in religion and the gifts of God in specific, as I will discuss in chapter 4.

relational context.¹¹

This leads me to suggest that a fundamental characteristic of the gift is that the gift has an aspect of freedom, and respects no boundaries. Even when it is identified, isolated, or defined, it can have multiple and contradictory identities. That is to say, the same thing, the same action, the same words spoken or written, can be both gift and not-gift at the same time. While it is this aspect that makes gift so accessible, it is at the same time that which makes gift a fundamentally weak paradigm, compared for example to the paradigm of exchange, which insists upon possession and precise boundaries.

Defining gift

Against the backdrop of this fluidity, freedom and contradiction, I approach with some reluctance the task of defining gift. On one hand, to propose that the word or concept of “gift” needs to be defined at all may suggest that one has already fallen prey to a process of deliberate confusion of what is in fact a generally well understood term. It could be argued that everyone knows what a gift is.¹² On the other hand, a definition is a boundary that surrounds and constrains a word or an idea. Even more to the point, as Vaughan points out, by proposing another word or group of words as equivalent to the word in question, definition belongs to the paradigm of exchange, which stands in opposition to the paradigm of gift.¹³

Nevertheless my intention of reviewing how writers and thinkers have understood gift calls

¹¹Indeed, I will explore in chapter 5 whether possession precludes gift.

¹²The Oxford English Dictionary’s primary definition of gift is “Something, the possession of which is transferred to another without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent; something transferred voluntarily to another without any valuable consideration.”

¹³According to Vaughan a definition is equivalent to the word defined; it is equal to it and can take its place or be exchanged. Genevieve Vaughan, *For-Giving: A Feminist Criticism of Exchange* (Austin: Plain View Press, 1997).

for some common reference points for understanding gifts. I will proceed by talking about five critical aspects of gift that would be generally accepted as essential to its meaning. First, *gift* involves ‘given-ness,’ a state or characteristic of being given. This characteristic raises many interesting questions about origins, ownership, purpose, etc., and also suggests movement.

Second, *gift* involves a free choice, a decision of will. While it may be driven by some internal sense of necessity or compulsion, it cannot be a legislated or obligatory thing, and is in each specific instance a voluntary choice or decision.

Third, *gift* does not involve compensation or return. It is not one side of an equation. It differs fundamentally from a payment or exchange in that it is not a “deal” or a contractual arrangement. This is not to say that a gift has no effect or purpose, or that it comes to an end when it is given. But a gift conceptually does not create an account to be balanced; it is not a loan or an advance.

Fourth, *gift* involves benevolent intention. While we may at times make reference to “gifts” given with malicious intent, this is not a part of our consideration.

Fifth, *gift* gives its attention to the *other*. The purpose of the gift is that the other have, or have access to, something that they do not currently have/have access to. Thus the gift, in every way (physically, in terms of intention and purpose) moves away from the giver.

Givenness

The most fundamental characteristic of gift is that of *givenness*. In simplest terms this means that gift is first and foremost recognised by the fact that something is given. Various forms of the verb *give* are used liberally and loosely in the English language, and as a result these words themselves are interesting but perhaps not especially helpful. Often they are used idiomatically. For

example, someone can be *given* “a hard time” or a beating, or a break. We can also *give* time, *give* up, or *give* in. Adding sums together *gives* a total. Give is also frequently used in the language of exchange and the market, as a synonym for *pay*. Givenness permeates human language and thought.

I began this chapter by stating that everything is gift. This is especially a statement about the *givenness* of everything. There is nothing that one can have, or that one can receive, that has not been given. While gifts can be converted to possessions and used in turn to buy and sell and accumulate, while one may through one’s own efforts develop a strong sense of having “earned” what is received and what is then possessed, all possession – all ownership – can be traced back to the conversion of gifts – that which is given – into commodities (that which is possessed), and any system that makes possession or ownership a moral right (as virtually all legal systems do) has lost sight of this fact.

In his book *Being Given; Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Jean-Luc Marion introduces his profound and often obscure inquiry into givenness by proclaiming that “what *shows itself* first *gives itself* — this is my one and only theme.”¹⁴ Marion’s particular interest is phenomenology, and how our consciousness or awareness interacts with external things/objects. All of these things – or phenomena – are *given* first and foremost, and should be understood by definition as such, rather than as things that are defined by our analysis and subsequent description of them. Here, *given* means that all phenomena are given – present themselves, give themselves – to our consciousness. Thus everything is encountered as fundamentally given, if not as gift. Jacques Derrida makes a similar point:

¹⁴Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 5.

The finite subject does not create its object, it receives it, receptively. Receptivity is interpreted as precisely the situation of the created being, the creature, which receives everything in the world as something created. So it is a gift. Everything is a gift.¹⁵

While this original givenness is a critical sign of gift and of the gift paradigm, givenness is not identical to gift. There are other characteristics of gift that need to be considered.

Freely Given

In suggesting that *gift* is an act of free choice or free will, rather than something that is obligatory, I am approaching the awkward areas of motivation and cause. In negative terms, I am suggesting that if I give something because I am obligated to give, and have no choice, this giving is not giftgiving. This is one of the key areas where the substantial influence of anthropological commentary on the philosophical/religious reflections on gift has had a confusing effect. Beginning with Mauss, anthropologists have focussed the dialogue regarding gifts on objects that are given and received in different societies and cultures in an obligatory way. From the first sentence of his essay proper, Mauss makes it clear that when he speaks of *gift* he is speaking of something non-voluntary:

The subject is clear. In Scandinavian civilisation, and in a good number of others, exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily.¹⁶

What is not clear is whether Mauss would contend that gifts are of necessity obligatory – I can only assume not, since he concedes that “in theory” gifts are voluntary, and since his strong emphasis on the obligatory nature of the gift systems he is studying would suggest that this is

¹⁵Caputo, 67.

¹⁶Mauss, 3.

unexpected or contrary to the norm. Later in this essay I will address the question of whether truly voluntary giving is possible, or whether it is only a theoretical concept. Meanwhile, note that if gift is necessarily obligated, then there is really no such thing as gift; or alternatively gift itself becomes merely another form of commerce, of exchange and only of limited sociological interest as such. “Obligatory gift” is a misnomer; a euphemism. In any event, Mauss’ scheme by which gift was defined as obligatory has been taken as normative by subsequent writers on gift. For example, Maurice Godelier maintains that while gift should be without calculation, it is not without obligation.¹⁷ Marshall Sahlins begins his inquiry into gift by accepting Mauss’ question of *why* there is return rather than *whether*.¹⁸

But beyond this critique of Mauss and other writers on gift, Marion’s proposition that all is given – and my introductory statement that all is gift – are categorical statements that leave no space for alternatives, apparently contradicting the voluntary nature of gifts. If everything is necessarily given in a fundamental, originary way, in what sense can gift be an expression of free will or choice?

I believe a distinction can be made between a natural pattern, an observation of the way things happen in the world that humans experience on the one hand, and the human response to or use of that pattern on the other. A paradigm is a model or an archetype rather than the thing itself; the human agent is left in every specific instance to respond to that pattern in one way or another, according to our choice and/or responding to various influences. Assuming Marion is correct, givenness is of the nature of things and the nature of human knowledge. Things present themselves in a mode of givenness; they cannot do otherwise. It is in receiving these “givens” that the question of

¹⁷Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. Nora Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999) 5.

¹⁸Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1972) 149ff.

gift comes into play, as one can receive them, use them, and pass them on as gifts, or not.

This raises several questions regarding gift in religious context that I will return to later in this essay, but that I want to acknowledge here. Marion is careful to state – and then attempts to build the case – that his view of givenness does not presuppose a transcendent giver.¹⁹ But clearly many people would view it differently, understanding originary givenness entirely in terms of a giving God. This in turn raises a question of whether God’s giving is a chosen giving, or whether it is God’s nature to give, and therefore there is no real alternative. Stephen Webb suggests that “God’s giving is who God is, . . . God is as God gives.”²⁰ This is not a critical part of our discussion, but it suggests that “original gifts” differ from subsequent giving. Whether or not the givenness of all things is understood in terms of a giving God, this givenness provides a pattern for giving rather than a definition for gift. Even though God’s giving is commonly understood as the giving of *gifts*, this is an approximation that is not ultimately useful without a theological perspective that can encompass also an understanding that God *chooses* to give. Choosing freely to give is a critical part of gift.

The Uncompensated Gift

A third characteristic of gift is that it is not a part of an equation; it is not one side of an exchange; in short, it does not involve compensation. Since this aspect of gift is the issue to which I am speaking in this essay, I will not discuss it at length here. Two introductory comments on the question of compensation or return are in order.

First, in describing this aspect of gift above I have talked about what it is not. It may be useful to try to find a positive wording for this aspect of gift. Here I suggest that gift is an open

¹⁹Marion, chapter 7.

²⁰Stephen Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 127-128.

invitation. It is something that presents or makes room for a new possibility; it is supplementary in the sense that it adds to what is there (to what one has); it is something that moves toward an *other* or toward *others*, or that comes from an other or others. Like an open invitation gift can be responded to or not, be compensated or not, but that response is not inherent in or demanded by the gift.

Second, it is difficult for humans to think outside of reciprocal terms. On the one hand this is because of the overwhelming power of dominant social and economic models on the way people think. Social structures, both primitive and modern, strive for balance and order, and are therefore highly reciprocal. All economic models and imagery are focussed on the return, or compensation – the cost – to the virtual exclusion of all else. The economic preoccupation with return, with the exchange equation, goes so far as to incorporate words such as mutuality or reciprocity into its vocabulary, in the process suppressing the unowned communitarian and relational content of such words.

But social and economic models are not the only – and perhaps not the primary – contributors to reciprocal thinking. The world of science and scientific processes also has a major impact. Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion states "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." There is little distance separating this and economic folk wisdom such as "you get what you pay for," or "nothing ventured, nothing gained." But our conceptualisation of reciprocity or "fairness" also goes beyond science and economics; it permeates our thinking about how life works and can work as well. As a result, for many religion is understood as the ultimate comprehensive system of reciprocity, one that projects beyond the vagaries of unrealised reciprocity (unfairness) in this life, and promises a settling of accounts after death.

It is precisely because of the dominance of the reciprocity model in human thought that it is important to understand gift as something that escapes the exchange equation. Again, there can be no point to the whole concept of gift if it – like economic exchange – simply involves a giving and receiving that is reciprocated; there are many other words that adequately convey the idea of reciprocal exchange; gift is not needed.

Benevolent Intent

Gift is not only defined by the intention that motivates it; it is also understood by both giver and receiver that this intention is benevolent.²¹ I have noted above (p. 13) Seneca's contention that intention (rather than the thing that is given or received) *is* the gift. This understanding – that a benevolent intention is itself a gift, and that the thing given/received is “a sign, visible itself, of an intention, a good will”²² is particularly significant in that it makes it easier for us to see the distinction between gift and exchange. As Goux points out, when the intention is understood as the gift, it is more obvious that if there is a response to the gift, “a new gift . . . will be made and not a return . . . It is not an exchange proper, but a relationship.”²³ Intention, as a thing of the soul, defies comparison or measurement, which is the heart of exchange. Seneca notes that “if you match the giver against the recipient, taking into consideration, as you must, their intentions in themselves, neither one nor the other will be the winners.”²⁴

Attention to the Other

²¹Malevolent intentions abound, but they are only understood as gifts euphemistically.

²²Goux, 155.

²³Goux, 156.

²⁴Lucius Seneca, *Seneca: Moral Essays, Volume III*, trans. John W. Basore (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935) 297.

This aspect of gift will be discussed in depth in chapters 3, 4, and 5. What should be said here in an introductory way is that the “other focus” of gift is at the core of the argument that gift can be distinguished from exchange. As is stressed in the following chapter, exchange can be reduced to the question of “what will I receive in return for what I give,” or alternatively “what must I give in order to receive what I desire”. This demonstrates the *ego* focus of exchange; if a “return” is understood as normative, such a focus is unavoidable. But if there is such a thing as a gift that is motivated and driven by the need of the other, that needs no further justification or rationalisation, then the onerous preoccupation with return falls away, and with it the focus on self interest.

Attention to the other is the heart of gift.

Summary

This attempt to give “definition” to gift cannot be entirely satisfactory because the freedom of the gift resists the bonds of definition. The characteristics discussed – givenness, free will or choice, the absence of compensation, benevolent intention, and other orientation – can perhaps best be understood as signs of the presence of gift. While there may be other characteristics that are significant, it is hard to imagine gift without all of these aspects present. The remainder of this essay will focus especially on reciprocity or return, but in the process I will remain attentive to this broader understanding of how gift functions.

Chapter 2: The Exchange Paradigm and the Gift

The logics of giving and of exchange contradict each other, but the one is also built upon the other. Exchange is a constrained double gift in that the receiver must give back to the giver an equivalent of what she has received. The product of one person takes the place of the product of the other.
(Genevieve Vaughan)

In the introduction to this essay I have discussed at some length the observation that the great majority of commentators on gift – whether they come from the disciplines of theology, philosophy or anthropology, view gift as a phenomenon located on the continuum of exchange. Those who view gift as distinct from exchange tend to see the two paradigms as a comprehensive polarity. The perspective of this essay is that gift is simply *other than* exchange; I would not claim that gift and exchange between them divide all the available space for modes of giving and receiving.

Nevertheless, because gift is understood by many as so much a part of exchange, it seems important to establish clarity regarding what is meant by exchange. The objective of this chapter is to outline some of the basic understandings of the exchange paradigm. I begin by noting several writers' views on the relationship between exchange and gift. This is followed by the consideration of six characteristics of exchange and how they function. Finally I highlight writings by Marshall Sahlins and Lewis Hyde that will help to clarify the issue of self and other interest in exchange.

Contrasting Paradigms?

In chapter 3 of this paper I discuss in some detail the thoughts of Genevieve Vaughan on the relationship between exchange and unilateral giftgiving as two contrasting paradigms around which society is ordered. In summary, Vaughan believes that giftgiving is the “original” paradigm from which exchange derives. She maintains this largely because she sees prior natural patterns (eg. the relationship between the sun and the earth, between mother and young, and in language or

communication) that establish giftgiving at or near the origins of life. Exchange is a later deviant form of giftgiving and is seen by Vaughan as entirely negative.

An alternative genealogy is put forward by Maurice Godelier. The anthropologist sees the two paradigms as complementary:

Human society drew on two sources for its emergence: contractual exchange on the one hand, and non-contractual transmission on the other. And it continues to advance on these two legs, to rest on these two bases, both of which are equally necessary and exist only by means of one another.²⁵

Godelier agrees with Vaughan that exchange – or contract – emerged later than gift in the evolution of social paradigms, but unlike Vaughan he does not understand exchange in strictly negative terms.

A third perspective is one that says everything is and has always been exchange, and giftgiving is merely a sub-set, or an early type of exchange. Marcel Mauss is the most obvious example of the many who implicitly or explicitly adopt this view.

These positions on the origins of different patterns are ambiguous; on the one hand they represent interesting speculation, but at the same time they seem just that – speculative. To begin with, there is no basis for understanding “first” as a moral category. I see no particular merit to the underlying assumption that what is original has a de facto moral precedence based on that originality alone. What can be said is that giftgiving and exchange are two social patterns that function in distinct ways and that have probably both been present at least since the earliest known human social structures.

Vaughan seems to see exchange and giftgiving as polar opposites, with exchange being evil and giftgiving being good. She imagines a world free of reciprocity and exchange, in which people relate to each other uniquely through sharing gifts. While the substance of much of Vaughan’s

²⁵Godelier, 36.

critique is convincing, this sort of binary opposition does not seem helpful because it eliminates nuance, and because it suggests the need to choose in an either/or way when the advantage of such a choice is not at all obvious.

While it is difficult to conceptualise an exchange-free world, or the necessity/ desirability of the same, it is equally difficult to know what Godelier really intends by saying that exchange and giftgiving are equally necessary and “exist only by means of one another.” Again this both/and, yin/yang approach is an appealing treatment of a supposed binary opposition, but what does it mean? Vaughan’s assertion that exchange as a strong paradigm overtakes and incorporates gift does seem true, regardless of whether gift is a prior paradigm to exchange.

Related to the above, a view of exchange as evil leads too easily to it being personified and treated as a thinking, acting force with a life of its own. This seems often the case in Vaughan’s writing. While the following discussion is basically critical of exchange patterns, I attempt to avoid presenting exchange simplistically as an evil force. My point is that the *gift* I am discussing in this essay is *other than* exchange.

Exchange often goes by a number of pseudonyms that can be confusing and misleading. For example *commerce* and *economy* are often used as stand-in terms. These give a particularly monetary and materialistic meaning to exchange. Material, commercial exchange itself comes in a variety of forms that is often understood in evolutionary terms. For example, some anthropologists see exchange progressing from what they call “gift exchange,” where goods are exchanged under a loose but unmistakable assumption of return; to barter, where goods are exchanged for goods without any guise of gift; to purchase, where money replaces goods as the means by which other desired or needed goods are obtained.

More problematic is the use of the term *reciprocity*. While its base word *reciprocal* is in fact a synonym of exchange, the particular form of the word *reciprocity* has taken on an additional meaning of mutuality, implying a bond that is not necessarily present in *exchange*, and it is therefore confusing when comparing giftgiving and exchange. Throughout this paper I nevertheless use the term *reciprocity* as a rough equivalent of *exchange*. My intention is that it be understood more in the physical or scientific sense of being inversely related rather than the social, “mutuality” aspect of the word.

A final aspect of the confusion that the term exchange entails in the discussion of gift and return is that there is a tendency to conflate any causal relationship between an action and whatever follows into an exchange. The concept of exchange is thus broadened beyond usefulness. If any action that results in anything else is an exchange, then obviously virtually everything that happens is exchange. This suggests the need for greater precision in the way the term exchange is used and understood.

Defining Exchange

In the following I attempt to give more specific definition to the concept of exchange as it is used in this paper, particularly with respect to how it relates to gift. Once again rather than using a formal definition I will discuss a variety of characteristics of exchange.

Focus on the self; giving to receive. As with gift, I am interested in exchange that involves *intention*. This is to say that I am not concerned with any activity that happens to take the form of an exchange, but rather with those exchanges that are deliberately initiated as exchanges. The intention in question is that of obtaining or receiving something (material or otherwise). In the context of the exchange, this intention concerns the need or desire of the self. In other words, if Rebecca

initiates an exchange with James, the objective is to obtain or receive something that Rebecca wants or needs.

This should not automatically be cast in negative or “selfish” terms; it is conceivable that Rebecca engages in an exchange in order to obtain something that will in turn be given to or used for someone else, but in the context of the exchange it is Rebecca’s interest that is at issue. In the same way, if James agrees to an exchange with Rebecca, he does so with his own interests at heart.

Thus in an exchange there are two intentions at play, which are identical intentions, but separate and disconnected from each other. Both intentions involve giving in order to receive something for the self. It could be added that in general the exchange intends to receive something for the self *to the advantage* of the self; i.e. one exchanges at what one considers to be one’s own advantage. Exchange is not disinterested.

Comparison and measurement. Exchange requires comparison and measurement. It involves both parties evaluating what is being given and what is being received and assumes that things exchanged can be quantified and assigned a relative value. In theory exchange seeks to establish equality of value or equal worth – as in one litre of milk is worth R. 5,00 – but in fact value is always highly relative and variable, even arbitrary. Value may be affected by many different factors, material and immaterial, objective and subjective. But in any case each party evaluates in terms of self interest – asking the question “is it worth it *to me* to give this in order to receive that.”

The dominance of the exchange paradigm reduces to value comparisons even those things that people traditionally believe cannot be given a value; for example, pain and suffering, life, death. Absolution has been given a value historically through the sale of indulgences, and in modern times in more subtle ways. Lewis Hyde relates the story of auto manufacturers who balance investments

necessary for safety improvements to vehicles against probable loss of life by placing a fixed monetary value on a human life.²⁶

Negative bonding. In exchange the bond between the parties is a negative one. Often affective relationships are seen as an impediment to exchange and are avoided. Exchange is in many cases an adversarial activity, or at least a competitive one. For this reason some cultures have axioms that one should not lend money, or sell a used automobile, to a family member. The term “let the buyer beware,” or *caveat emptor* indicates that exchange is risky. Many exchanges lead to legal suits, while manufacturers publish extensive disclaimers to protect themselves from disgruntled consumers. Likewise the obligations of exchange (respective payments) are understood as binding in a negative way, in that they are non-voluntary and have recourse to legal action.

Exchange is also impersonal, with the focus maintained on the items of exchange rather than the parties involved. In general the circumstances of the people exchanging is of secondary interest.

There is another aspect to the anti-relational aspect of exchange. This is that the goods or services transferred are completely alienated from those who give or exchange them. These goods or services become the sole possessions of the respective receivers. It is difficult to imagine a “spirit” of the original owner in commodities that are bought and sold.²⁷

Classification and categorisation. Another effect of exchange is that it encourages classifying different things in ways that emphasise likenesses and de-emphasise differences. The preoccupation of exchange is to find a presumptive equivalence that will allow the transaction to take place. Therefore it is expedient to group together things that are similar and give them a

²⁶Hyde, 63-64.

²⁷Mauss cites something of an exception to this in Chinese law, where “an individual who has sold an item of his property, even a movable good, preserves his whole life through, vis a vis the buyer, a kind of right ‘to weep for his property’...” Mauss, 63-64.

common value.

Scarcity. In her book *For-Giving* Genevieve Vaughan repeatedly makes the case that the exchange system requires scarcity. In a situation of abundance, she states, giftgiving flourishes and exchange is unnecessary. This seems demonstrably true. Abundance means that supply is far greater than demand. When the market is faced with abundance it often resorts to the destruction of excess in order to stimulate exchange.²⁸ As an example, farmers in North America are often subsidised to promote scarcity (in an ironic contrast to traditional motifs connecting agriculture with abundance) by keeping agricultural land out of production.²⁹

Dominating Paradigm. Elsewhere in this paper I note that giftgiving is a paradigm of weakness in that it does not demand a return; indeed, it does not demand at all. Exchange, by contrast, makes very explicit demands and as such can be seen paradigm that must dominate. Because it requires and demands, it leads to the crowding out or overtaking of competing paradigms. In many parts of the world annual times of traditional giftgiving (especially Christmas but also other religious holidays) are the year's most active and profitable periods of exchange.

That exchange has already largely “taken over” formal giving can also be seen by the fact that charitable organisations promote themselves and solicit “gifts” by emphasising exchange – what the giver will receive – along with need. Examples of this are a focus on tax deductions or business writeoffs for charitable giving, emphasis on “exactly what your contribution will do,” and the “packaging” of need to suit donor preference. Many non profit agencies that depend on giving use

²⁸For example, food-grains, milk, etc. are routinely destroyed when prices drop below acceptable levels due to over-supply. At roadside produce stands it is often the case that while the earliest tomatoes and other vegetables are high priced, in the fullness of the season if there is a good year the same vegetables may be offered free of charge. On a larger scale – i.e. a company or business whose entire purpose is exchange – the option of giving away excess is not an option, unless it can be done *in exchange* for some benefit.

²⁹Once again with some irony, this could be seen as returning gifts to the earth.

matching schemes that “give a greater return on your gift.” A pervasive movement among “helping” or “giving” agencies toward contractualism, by which specific quid pro quos are required of the recipients, is another expression of the same phenomenon. All of these practices prevalent in charitable agencies emphasise the need for a return to the donor, thus converting gift into commodity. It demonstrates that it is very difficult for exchange to co-exist with giftgiving, because a focus on self interest is all consuming, and ultimately even commodifies “other-interest.” Vaughan notes that

As a template or deep metaphor for other interactions, exchange is very powerful. The self-reflecting aspect in the equation of value (x commodity = y amount of money) creates an artificial standard for what humans are and what their relations should be.³⁰

To conclude this chapter on the nature of exchange I will review two treatments that illustrate in different ways the relationships between giftgiving and exchange.

Marshall Sahlins’ Typology of Exchange

In his essay *On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange*, Marshall Sahlins develops a typology of exchange that challenges a rigid view of exchange in opposition to gift.³¹ Sahlins’ study is anthropological, focussed specifically on traditional societies, though with adaptation it has relevance for our more general interest.

Sahlins’ points of reference are the immediacy and the equivalence of the return of materials given. His typology proposes an exchange continuum from what might be called “pure gift” to theft. He emphasises that exchange in traditional societies cannot be understood in terms of the narrowly

³⁰Wyschogrod, 100.

³¹Sahlins, 185-276.

economic. To a much greater extent than is the case in modern society, material traffic and different levels of reciprocity therein not only *reflect* the relationships of those involved, they also function as *instruments* of social relations. “If friends make gifts, gifts make friends.”³²

“Generalised reciprocity” is at one extreme of the continuum. This involves, for example, the daily kindnesses of sharing, hospitality, and neighbourliness. Sahlins insists that reciprocity/return is not absent even at this extreme, but it is vague and indefinite, and often may never take place. The return depends on the possibilities of the receiver. “Failure to reciprocate does not cause the giver of stuff to stop giving...”³³ Here the “material flow” is sustained by the relations that exist.

“Balanced reciprocity” is the midpoint of Sahlins’ continuum. This is what would be understood as trade, commerce, but it also includes certain kinds of “gift exchanges.” In balanced reciprocity it is assumed that a return must be effected in a timely way, and that equivalence is an issue. Relationships are dependant on the material flow.

The far extreme Sahlins calls “Negative reciprocity.” Here the prevalent attitude is to get as much as possible for as little as possible. It would include barter but also trickery, theft and seizure.

Sahlins goes on to describe in considerable detail what factors determine the level of reciprocity that comes into play. As might be expected the most significant of these is kinship distance; closer kinship calls for more generalised reciprocity – i.e. less insistence on return and greater approximation of “pure gift.” But there are other important factors, including social rank, age, relative wealth, and the different kinds of goods involved.³⁴

³²Sahlins, 186.

³³Sahlins, 194.

³⁴It is important to observe that the question of morality relating to giving and receiving in traditional societies is not generalised. The moral focus is on relationships. If “good and bad” are determined by the interests of those with whom one is most closely related (through kinship especially, but otherwise as well), then

Considerable emphasis is placed on the fact that reciprocity is imprecise. Not only are there a variety of determining factors, these factors interact with each other with much nuance. Furthermore the individual players in exchange have distinct personalities, and may be by nature more or less self-interested or altruistic. In addition, as mentioned above the various forms of exchange are not merely reflective of social relations, they can also be used to create or change such relations. Sahlins notes that this imprecision is a social good.

The exchange that is symmetrical or unequivocally equal carries some disadvantage from the point of view of alliance: it cancels debts and thus opens the possibility of contracting out. If neither side is “owing” then the bond between them is comparatively fragile. But if accounts are not squared, then the relationship is maintained by virtue of “the shadow of indebtedness,” and there will have to be further occasions of association, perhaps as occasions of further payment.³⁵

A further effect of this imprecision in whether, how, when, why, and to what degree things given are returned, is to call into question the validity of the use of the word *reciprocity* as a conceptual heading for the movement of goods and services at issue. To speak of a *typology of reciprocity* is to already bias our thinking in such a way as to focus on an exchange, on the return, when in fact at both extremes there is little or no return at all. Sahlins himself makes the interesting related point that reciprocity *proprement dite* is not the norm in traditional society:

The casual received view of reciprocity supposes some fairly direct one-for-one exchange, balanced reciprocity, or a near approximation of balance. It may not be inappropriate, then, to footnote this discussion with a respectful demur: that in the main run of primitive societies, taking into account directly utilitarian as well as instrumental transactions, *balanced reciprocity is not the prevalent form of exchange*. A question might even be raised about the stability of balanced reciprocity. Balanced exchange may tend toward self-liquidation. . . . May we conclude that balanced reciprocity is inherently unstable? Or perhaps that it requires

it follows that at the centre one gives gifts, on the periphery one exchanges, and outside of the boundaries anything goes.

³⁵Sahlins, 222.

special conditions for continuity?³⁶

Sahlins' essay nevertheless raises questions regarding the assertions above that exchange involves self-interest and negative bonding. I will take up these questions following an overview of another treatment of exchange, this one by Lewis Hyde.

*Usury: A History of Gift Exchange*³⁷

In this essay Lewis Hyde traces the history of usury, particularly in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. He begins by noting that originally the term *usury* referred to interest of any kind, rather than excessive interest as in the modern meaning of the word. Deuteronomic law prohibited usury (interest) within the tribe, but allowed it outside the tribal or faith boundary.

You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest. .
.” (Deuteronomy 23: 19-20)

Hyde notes that an interest free loan means that the increase that is created by the money that is loaned is seen as a free gift, and within the “gift circle” such gifts must circulate rather than being appropriated by an individual. Thus usury is prohibited within the tribe. Beyond the boundary there is risk that the increase or gift will be expropriated and lost to the group, therefore in the Deuteronomic law interest is allowed with “strangers.”

Jesus' teachings complicated the issue of usury because Jesus essentially called into question the boundary between “brother” and “other.”

When someone asks, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan. Compassion, not blood, makes one a brother. This spirit changes the boundary of the tribe. The house of Israel has no wall (except faith) after Jesus

³⁶Sahlins, 223 (emphasis added).

³⁷Hyde, 109-140.

travels to Tyre and Sidon and is himself moved by the faith of the Canaanite woman.³⁸

This radical adjustment of boundaries leaves no room for usury.

Hyde points out that this resulted in usury being disallowed in the early church and throughout the Middle Ages. From the time of the joining of the church and the state under Constantine, the boundary of the “tribe” became the boundary of the state, and usury was permitted when dealing with those beyond the state/faith, those seen as *enemies*.³⁹

Under Luther and the Reformation moral law and economic life were separated. The state’s increasing interest in commerce and property rights led to the growth of private property. One of the results of this change was that the distinction between *interest* and *usury* was legitimated, giving usury the excessive, negative meaning that it maintains today. A further result was a radical shift in the location of the boundary between brother and other.

In the Old Testament, mankind as a whole is seen as either Brother or Other, and an Israelite conducts himself differently depending on whom he is with. Now each man is divided. The church and the state may be separate but each man partakes of both. When each man has a civil and a moral part, the brother and the stranger live side by side in his heart. Now when I meet someone on the street he is either alien or kin, depending on his business.⁴⁰

Hyde suggests that this shift leads to a strange reversal. The charging of interest – previously something reserved for strangers – is now the accepted way among friends. Money is loaned (with interest) to those whom one trusts. On the other hand charity – which resembles the giving of gifts – becomes a way of dealing with the stranger.

³⁸Hyde, 116.

³⁹Hyde points out that this essentially eliminated the middle ground of exchange; what Sahlins refers to as *balanced reciprocity*. Here the only possibilities are friend or enemy. See Hyde, 135.

⁴⁰Hyde, 125.

Charity treats the poor like the aliens of old; it is a form of foreign trade, a way of having some commerce without including the stranger in the group. At its worst, it is the “tyranny of gift,” which uses the bonding power of generosity to manipulate people.⁴¹

The Sahlins and Hyde essays raise questions related to self interest and negative bonding, which I have proposed as characteristic of exchange earlier in this chapter. At issue in particular is Sahlins’ category of *generalised reciprocity* that closely resembles “pure gift.” The writer asserts that exchange that takes place within the traditional family/ community often focusses more strongly on the social than on the material aspects of the transaction. The obligation to return is suppressed and may in fact never be fulfilled. At this level “exchange” is often a means to initiate or maintain social relations rather than a method of obtaining a desired return.

Sahlins’ typology raises a variety of questions. Is this in fact a continuum of exchange as Sahlins maintains, or is it rather describing a spectrum that includes gift and exchange? If the latter, does it suggest that gift and exchange can best be understood as a single category having to do with the social and historical movement of goods and services; movement that is always expressed in the specific as some kind of mixture of characteristics of the two “paradigms”? If it is legitimately a description of varieties of exchange, does this imply that gift is simply one form of exchange, or is there a distinct category of unilateral giftgiving that does not appear in Sahlins’ typology? If Sahlins is in fact describing exchange, how does one explain the apparent “other-interest” and “relationship-building” intent and effect of generalised reciprocity?

It is on the last of these questions that I want to focus here. To begin with, Sahlins is describing traditional societies. In such settings both the individual – the self – and ownership are

⁴¹Hyde, 138.

understood quite differently from the modern context of this inquiry. The adage “I am because we are” – so often applied to traditional societies – if taken seriously requires a different definition of *self interest* from the one generally accepted, which involves an individual self. If the self is in fact in some sense more plural, as many insist is the case, then our understanding of self-interest must be redefined accordingly. Christopher Jencks, in describing different kinds of unselfishness, states:

What I will call empathic unselfishness derives from the fact that we “identify” with people outside ourselves. We incorporate their interests into our subjective welfare function, so that their interests become our own. As a result, our ‘selfish’ interests are no longer synonymous with the interests of the biological organism in which our consciousness resides.⁴²

A modern idealisation of the generalised reciprocity that takes place in traditional societies is thus to some extent misplaced, and what may appear as disinterested gift-giving might better be understood as in some sense giving to the self.

This view would have a similar implication for the question of relationships and negative bonding. There is no doubt that much of the morally prescribed generalised reciprocity that takes place in traditional societies does in fact build relationships within the group in question. But to the extent that the boundary of the self is in such cases extended beyond the individual, giving within the close community amounts to building relationships with the self, or developing the basic identity. It is similar to modern giving within the nuclear family, and as such it is neither gift nor exchange, but a form of self development or self realisation.

What is particularly useful in both the Sahlins and the Hyde essays is the perspectives on the significance of boundaries. Sahlins emphasises that modes of exchange change on the basis of boundaries – boundaries of kinship, rank, class, etc. Hyde follows the theme of usury through

⁴²Christopher Jencks, “The Social Basis fo Unselfishness,” *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Aafke Komter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 177.

various historical redefinition of boundaries in the Judaeo-Christian story – between the Israelites and surrounding groups, between the Christian state and its “enemies,” between the self and the other. Significantly, as Hyde points out, Jesus’ apparent abolition of boundaries between the “brother and the other” causes a considerable dilemma for exchange generally and laws of usury in particular.

Elsewhere in his book Hyde makes the telling comment that exchange functions between two distinct spheres.

We might best picture the difference between gifts and commodities in this regard by imagining two territories separated by a boundary. A gift, when it moves across the boundary, either stops being a gift or else abolishes the boundary. A commodity can cross the line without any change in its nature; moreover, its exchange will often establish a boundary where none previously existed (as, for example, in the sale of a necessity to a friend). *Logos*-trade draws the boundary, *eros*-trade erases it.⁴³

In this view the socially obligatory giving that operates within the boundary of the group – Sahlins’ generalised reciprocity – is something other than gift as I have defined it. Just as property within such traditional groups to a large degree belongs to and is for the benefit of the group, so what is given within the group need not return, because in a real sense it has never left.

This is not to say that there is no gift in traditional cultures. Sahlins points out that there are many unknowns and uncertainties, and while he dwells on the negative side of these uncertainties (“the people may be stingy”; “inclinations of self-interest are unleashed that are incompatible with the high levels of sociability customarily demanded”; “all the things that make sharing good and proper may not evoke in an affluent man the inclination to do it”⁴⁴), there would by the same token

⁴³Hyde, 61.

⁴⁴Sahlins, 203-204

be the positive unknowns – people who show unobligated generosity, and generosity that goes beyond the boundaries of the group. This is the terrain of gift – free of obligation and free of return.

Chapter 3: The Literature of Gift and Exchange

Gift giving is at least in part a cultural artifact, a socially created institution, embedded in specific rituals and particular languages of rules and customs. What giving does is what it says, so that language and act are fused together. Style and function are thus the two interrelated features of the form of the gift. Gift giving, after all, is not only a physical act but also rhetorical; it is a form of self expression and a way of communicating with others, as well as a means of distributing goods outside the usual operations of the market. (Stephen Webb)

I have emphasised in the Introduction and subsequently that the return of the gift – whether a gift imposes an obligation, whether it is a *commerce* or an *economy* – is the central question addressed by the vast majority of those persons of different disciplines who are engaged in thinking about and discussing gifts. Because the position of this essay is that there is giving and receiving that cannot be understood as exchange, it is essential to critically examine the arguments of those who explicitly or implicitly deny such a possibility. My purpose in this chapter is thus to identify and critique the treatment of this theme of return as it is articulated by a selection of commentators on gift.

The five writers reviewed here come from diverse disciplines – sociology, literary criticism, philosophy, social activism, theology – but along with many others,⁴⁵ each makes valuable contributions to our understanding of the return of gifts. I will give particular attention to Marcel Mauss, Lewis Hyde, Jacques Derrida, Genevieve Vaughan, and Stephen Webb, identifying their diverse perceptions of the relationship of gift and exchange, and the issue of return or reciprocity in gift. By following this theme through the works of these writers, I will articulate more clearly my own view that there is gift – giving and receiving – which is not captive to exchange.

⁴⁵Notably Maurice Godelier, Marshall Sahlins, Pierre Bourdieu, Annette Weiner, Georges Bataille, Aafke Komter, Lucius Seneca, Stephen Tyler, Jean-Joseph Goux, Adriaan Peperzak. See bibliography.

Mauss' Gift

Marcel Mauss was a French sociologist/philosopher/anthropologist who lived from 1872 to 1950. His most noted work, *Essai sur le Don*, was first published in 1925. This brief work, published in English as *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, has become the undisputed point of departure for subsequent study and reflection on gift by philosophers, theologians, anthropologists and sociologists alike.

There are many useful commentaries on Mauss' work, beginning with Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Introduction à l'oeuvre de Marcel Mauss*, first published in 1950.⁴⁶ My discussion of Mauss here is in no way meant to deal comprehensively with his writing on gift; instead I wish to look specifically at the fact of his work as a starting point for subsequent consideration of gift, and within that focus, Mauss' views on gift and exchange. Mauss' own purpose goes in a different direction, and my comments should not be seen as engaging that purpose, but rather as challenging the status of Mauss' work as a primary source for understanding gifts.

The problematic of Mauss' commentary on gifts begins before the book is opened. The title and sub-title present an insurmountable contradiction: *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Gift is for Mauss a category or stage of exchange. Even if one discounts the sub-title as an addition of the translator, as I noted in chapter 1, Mauss is writing of "gift" that is theoretically voluntary, but in fact obligatory and requiring reciprocation or return. Thus Mauss establishes that gift is a part of the exchange paradigm, and that gifts are given and reciprocated obligatorily. Again as discussed briefly in chapter 1, it is unclear whether Mauss would contend that gifts are *of necessity* obligatory. I can only assume not, since he concedes that "in

⁴⁶Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. Felicity Baker (London: Routledge, 1987). One of the most thorough recent studies of Mauss is that of Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*.

theory” gifts are voluntary, and since his strong emphasis on the obligatory nature of the gift systems he is studying would suggest that this is an unexpected finding or contrary to the norm.

In any event, as will be shown later in this chapter it is easily demonstrable that there are things that are given voluntarily without compensation. Why then does Mauss – and virtually the entire corpus of anthropologists since Mauss – use the term *gift* to describe giving that is both obligatory and compensated? The question seems particularly appropriate since there are many alternative words that can be used to describe transfers of goods, services and persons that are obligatory and/or compensated – such as tribute, reward, tax, loan, sale, trade, bribe, exchange, purchase, etc. To begin to answer this question one should take note of the items and types of transactions that Mauss refers to as gifts and gift exchanges:

Moreover, what they exchange is not solely property and wealth, movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract. Finally, these total services and counter-services are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare.⁴⁷

It is the potlatch, and other less agonistic ritual giving and counter giving that seem to epitomise the phenomenon for Mauss, and one might speculate that it was the spectacle of such graphic displays of giving that drew his attention – and that of other anthropologists – and led to the development of this thoughts around the “gift” theme.

Thus on the one hand the activity in question looked very much like gift giving on the surface, and on the other hand it was clearly seen to have much more or much different meaning

⁴⁷Mauss, 6.

than simple economic activity as we know it. Since there are few categories or paradigms other than gift and commodity by which to classify relationships between people involving goods and/or services, it is perhaps understandable why the phenomenon was termed gift.

To a degree Mauss himself recognises that the “gift” category is not appropriate for the phenomenon he is describing: “The terms that we have used – present and gift – are not themselves entirely exact.”(p.72-3) He goes on to say “We shall, however, find no others.”(p.73) This is because the categories that are used to distinguish economic and other social activities are simply not relevant in the cases he has studied. Mauss stresses the relative complexity of relationships in traditional societies, which complicates our efforts to understand exchange:

The clans, the generations, and the sexes generally – because of the many different relationships to which the contracts give rise – are in a perpetual state of economic ferment and this state of excitement is very far from being materialistic. It is far less prosaic than our buying and selling. . . . it is a sort of hybrid that flourished.⁴⁸

Elsewhere Mauss is even more clear that the phenomenon he is studying only appears to be a gift phenomenon:

Almost always such services have taken the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest.⁴⁹

From the beginning of his essay Mauss makes it clear that gift “exchange” should be seen as continuous with trade or commerce. It is simply an early or primitive form of trade: “We shall see the market as it existed before the institution of traders and before their main invention – money proper.”(p. 4)

⁴⁸Mauss, 72-73.

⁴⁹Mauss, 6.

Mauss' book, then, is not really the most useful point of departure for gift theory and studies of gift giving, since even by the author's admission it is not about gifts, but obligatory and compensated exchanges disguised as gifts. In a sense Mauss' point is the opposite of my thesis that gift is not an economy. He is clear: gift is an economy, or a part of a system in which giving and receiving are always in a reciprocal relationship with each other:

For Mauss, gift must always be reciprocated/returned; the obligation is a given. In fact, not only is reciprocation obligatory, but giving and receiving are as well:

The institution of 'total services' does not merely carry with it the obligation to reciprocate presents received. It also supposes two other obligations just as important: the obligation, on the one hand, to give presents, and on the other, to receive them.⁵⁰

The difference in how gift is defined or understood is clear.

Let me reiterate what is already stated in the introduction to this essay. My task is not to discredit any particular view or definition of gift. But I do reject those "definitions" of gift which are absolute and insist on taking possession of gift and confining it to particular and rigid boundaries. I would readily agree that the phenomenon examined by Mauss functions as an economy, and even as part of *the* economy. And Mauss is clearly free to call that phenomenon "gift." But to take the further step of saying that because the giving and receiving Mauss observed appeared obligatory, or had to be reciprocated, therefore gift in general is obligatory and reciprocal is to go too far. My contention is simply that a different kind of giving and receiving does exist, and that this giving/receiving in fact corresponds substantially to our everyday understandings about and definitions of gift – that it is excessive, and that it is voluntary, uncompensated, and motivated by benevolent intent.

⁵⁰Mauss, 13.

Particularly in light of Mauss' understanding of gift as an economy, it is worthwhile to look more closely at the real concern of Mauss' *The Gift*, which is why "gift" must be returned:

What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, 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?⁵¹

The most important feature . . . is clearly one that obliges a person to reciprocate the present that has been received. . . . Let us study it in greater detail, and we will plainly see what force impels one to reciprocate the thing received, and generally to enter into real contracts.⁵²

Mauss answers this question in a complicated and ultimately unsatisfactory way. In brief, what the writer proposes is that the thing that is given – the gift – is not inanimate; instead it possesses some part, some aspect of the "spirit" or soul of the "original owner"; furthermore this spirit longs to return to its "home," its original "owner," or to cause some equivalent to so return.

What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him.....This something must be returned to the original giver.....the legal tie, a tie occurring through things, is one between souls, because the thing itself possesses a soul, is of the soul. Hence it follows that to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself.....In this system of ideas *one clearly and logically realizes* that one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul..... "Finally, the thing given is not inactive. Invested with life, often possessing individuality, it seeks to return to what Hertz called its 'place of origin' or to produce, on behalf of the clan and the native soil from which it sprang, an equivalent to replace it."⁵³

I do not have any objection to the fact that Mauss' solution to his fundamental question takes us into a metaphysical or spiritual realm. Instead there are two substantive critiques. First, the

⁵¹Mauss, 3 (author's emphasis).

⁵²Mauss, 7.

⁵³Mauss, 11-13 (emphasis added).

logic of Mauss' solution is not at all as self evident as he suggests. If one gives something that is in some spiritual sense "part and parcel of his nature and substance," it does not follow that the thing must be returned to the giver *because* it is part of him or her, nor does it follow that it in some way seeks to return to its place of origin. Mauss states, above, that in "this system of ideas one clearly and logically realizes that one must give back" something coming from another person *because* the gift is a part of the giver. In fact there is nothing clear or logical about such a view of ownership. The mythological paradigm of *return* is no stronger than that of *expansion* and *venturing out*. Indeed a convincing case can be made that the dominant paradigm of life itself is one of moving out, of expansion, and of giving up the self – parts of our spiritual essence – to the creation of something new. The suggestion that any thing that is of me must return to me is logical only in a strongly ownership-oriented mentality. It is hard to see how it would appear logical in a more pervasively communitarian context where ownership is a tenuous and often elusive concept.

While I do not find the idea of spirit or soul of the thing given objectionable, it does raise the further question of whether only so-called gifts have this connection to the owner/giver, or whether it is also present in things that are clearly exchanged or sold. If so, does the spirit of a thing sold behave any differently than the spirit of a gift?

A second way in which Mauss' solution is objectionable is that it is unnecessarily complex. Once the case is made that gift is an economy, not only from the analytical view of the anthropologist, but from the point of view of the subject as well, there remains no mystery why a "gift" must be returned. It is for the same reason that when one is "given" a meal at a restaurant one must "reciprocate" at the cash register when one leaves: because it is an economic or exchange activity. Mauss seems to want to have it both ways: he names the phenomenon as "gift," then asserts

that gift is an economy, then presents as a mystery the fact that his redefined “gift” functions economically. Mauss’ gift returns because that is how he has recognised and defined it.

In conclusion, I do not take issue with Mauss’ basic analysis of how apparent presents or gifts are used in archaic – as well as many modern – societies. What I question is whether Mauss’ understanding of gift is broad enough, and whether there is justification in assuming from Mauss’ study that return and obligation are inherent to gift per se.

Hyde’s Gift

Lewis Hyde is a poet, writer, and literary critic. His book *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* is an attempt to outline “a theory of gift exchange.”⁵⁴ Hyde writes primarily from the point of view of the artist rather than the scientist, though he draws upon Mauss and other anthropologist commentators on gift.

There is much that could be discussed at great length from Hyde’s writing. I want to look very briefly at the writer’s contribution to the question of reciprocity or return. In this Hyde is at times confusing because he uses the language of Mauss – with frequent references to gift *exchange*, the return of the gift, and even “obligation” – and yet it seems clear that Hyde sees these aspects in a way that is significantly different from Mauss. While the gift of Mauss’ study is a gift that provides and reinforces structure, order, balance and status quo to society, Hyde’s gift is always permeating boundaries, leading away from what is, and pointing toward a kind of disorderly or chaotically free space, to the unknown.

Hyde recognises clearly the problem of obligated gift:

Now, it is true that something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were

⁵⁴Hyde, xvi.

made an explicit condition of the exchange, it wouldn't be a gift.⁵⁵

He goes on to make the insightful point that gift is distinguished from market exchange in that the latter is concerned with balancing the scale, while in the case of the gift

....there is momentum, and the weight shifts from body to body.....Another way to describe the motion of the gift is to say that a gift must always be used up, consumed, eaten. *The gift is property that perishes*.a gift is consumed when it moves from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return. There is little difference, therefore, between its consumption and its movement.⁵⁶

The idea that the gift is consumed – is “property that perishes” – serves to ensure a radical separation from the giver, and causes also the death of any obligation of the receiver to the giver. Mauss’ “spirit” of the “original owner” is also lost in this consumption, and with it the obligation to return.

Hyde distinguishes between return and movement: “...it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: *the gift must always move*.”⁵⁷ In a critical passage on reciprocity, Hyde further defines this movement and its distinctiveness from *quid pro quo*:

We commonly think of gifts as being exchanged between two people and of gratitude being directed back to the actual donor. ‘Reciprocity,’ the standard social science term for returning a gift, has this sense of going to and fro between people.... Reciprocal giving is a form of gift exchange, but it is the simplest. The gift moves in a circle, and two people do not make much of a circle.... Circular giving differs from reciprocal giving in several ways. First, when the gift moves in a circle no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to..... When I give to someone from whom I do not receive,...it is as if the gift goes around a corner before it comes back. I have to give blindly.⁵⁸

⁵⁵Hyde, 9.

⁵⁶Hyde, 8-9.

⁵⁷Hyde, 4.

⁵⁸Hyde, 15-16.

In contrast to Mauss, where gift giving is understood as that which cements society and strengthens its boundaries, for Hyde the gift circle leads ever outward:

When we are in the spirit of the gift we love to feel the body open outward. The ego's firmness has its virtues, but at some point we seek the slow dilation ... in which the ego enjoys a widening give and take with the world and is finally abandoned in ripeness.... Now the part that says 'me' is scattered. There is no boundary to be outside of, unless the universe itself is bounded.⁵⁹

But precisely on this point, Hyde does not simply drift away into blissful, gift-filled mystical space. One senses that the poetic metaphor takes him in one direction while a desire to speak to real, practical community draws him back to another.⁶⁰ He concludes his essay by saying that neither gift nor commodity – the “two primary shades of property” –

...is ever seen in its pure state, for each needs at least a touch of the other – commodity must somewhere be filled and gift somewhere must be encircled.⁶¹

Despite this qualification, what is gained from Hyde on the question of gift and return or reciprocity is the suggestion that gift is not just an early form of commodity, or commodity in disguise. Hyde – more as a poet than as a social scientist – opens the way for understanding gift as a truly alternative paradigm, one that is expansive and looks outward, one for which the circle of gifts – if it is a closed circle – at least extends much more widely and is less confining, less self-conscious, than the circles of obligation described by Mauss.

Derrida's Gift

Jacques Derrida is a contemporary philosopher who is probably best known for his association with deconstructionism. For some time he has been interested in, and has written

⁵⁹Hyde, 17.

⁶⁰More on Hyde's resolution of the question of return and boundary is found in the discussion on usury in chapter 2 of this essay, and in the author's chapter titled *The Gift Community*, 74-92.

⁶¹Hyde, 139.

extensively on, the gift and related *aporia* – a Greek term meaning a dilemma with no apparent solution, and one of Derrida’s favoured terms and concepts. His observations on gift are best summarised by his assertion that gift is the impossible, but it is never clear exactly what he means by this. It seems that a key part of Derrida’s understanding of his mission is to evade every attempt at definition and to actively practice the fluidity and elasticity of words and concepts. Fair enough; it is not necessary for us to understand all of the intricacies of Derrida’s understanding of gift, because his basic presentation of the *aporia* of gift is adequately clear, and the issues I want to raise regarding Derrida’s gift come directly from that presentation. Once again the analysis and commentary will focus on the thesis that gift is not a commerce or an economy.

While gift has been a repeated theme in Derrida’s writing, it is in *Donner le temps*, published in 1991 and translated as *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* that the essential understanding is best outlined. *Given Time* was in turn based in part on essays and lectures dating back to the late 1970's. The theme is woven through subsequent writings and has also been treated prominently in John Caputo’s commentaries on Derrida.

My perspective on Derrida’s treatment of gift can be summarised by the following:

1. Derrida’s critique of Mauss (that Mauss does not really deal with gift) is very similar to mine.
2. But ultimately Derrida – in his very criticism of Mauss’ gift “economy” – himself relies on “economic” thinking.
3. Furthermore, Derrida draws (from where?) a set of rules and absolutes about gift as a concept and as a possibility that are never accounted for, and that seem thoroughly incompatible with his deconstructionist orientation.

4. Ultimately I disagree with Derrida about the possibility of gift without return.

The Critique of Mauss

Derrida begins where we must begin, with the question of economy or return.

What is economy? Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, economy no doubt includes the values of law (*nomos*) and of home (*oikos*, home, property, family, the hearth, the fire indoors). *Nomos* does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution (*moira*), the given or assigned part, participation....As soon as there is law, there is partition: as soon as there is *nomos*, there is economy. Besides the values of law and home, of distribution and participation, economy implies the idea of exchange, or circulation, of return.⁶²

Derrida goes on to note that an economy has to do with the circle, as in circulation, and that finally the “law of economy is the – circular – return to the point of departure, to the origin, also to the home.”⁶³ Gift must be related in some way to economy, because it involves the movement of “goods” from one (person) to another. But – and herein lies the *aporia* – gift is supposedly that which breaks with economy and exchange, “[t]hat which opens the circle so as to defy reciprocity or symmetry.”⁶⁴

[The gift] must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, by the process of exchange, by the movement of circulation of the circle in the form of return to the point of departure.⁶⁵

Thus, the impossibility of the gift – or rather, the gift as the impossible. Derrida’s *aporia* will be examined more carefully below; here I will consider specifically his critique of Mauss.

Derrida’s initial mention of Mauss in *Given Time* clarifies his position from the start:

One could go so far as to say that a work as monumental as Marcel Mauss’s *The*

⁶²Derrida, 6.

⁶³Derrida, 7.

⁶⁴Derrida, 7.

⁶⁵Derrida, 7.

Gift speaks of everything but the gift: It deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift *and* counter-gift – in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift *and* the annulment of the gift.⁶⁶

Derrida specifically questions how and why Mauss applies the term gift to specific phenomena in other cultures and languages. A related critique is that Mauss gathers together diverse phenomena and names them gift when that word or concept itself is uncertain. What Derrida finds inexcusable in Mauss is that the latter “never asks the question as to whether gifts can remain gifts once they are exchanged.”⁶⁷

Also of interest in Derrida’s critique is the question of time in relation to the gift. For Mauss the answer to his self-imposed dilemma of why the gift must return resides in the “thing” given itself – the spirit of the gift – which functions as a part or extension of the “original” owner or giver, and longs to return to its home. Therefore Mauss’ gift is not only obliged to return, but it obliges itself to return; it carries within it its own annulment, since as Derrida is only too happy to point out, the concept of gift requires that it function outside of economy or return. One then must ask what it really is that the gift gives. Mauss’ answer is time. The gift, unlike common trade or purchase, must not be returned immediately or identically, there is a necessary – even obligatory – delay. As Derrida shows us, this raises the question of how gift is distinguished from credit or loan, which also “gives” time.

Mauss tries to reconstitute, so to speak, the value of gift, of ‘present made’ and of ‘present repaid’ where others wanted to describe the same operation of exchange with interest as a purely economic, commercial, or fiduciary operation, without

⁶⁶Derrida, 24.

⁶⁷Derrida, 37. This is not exactly true; as noted above, Mauss does acknowledge that he is not really talking about gifts, but Derrida’s point remains well taken, because it is treated as an insignificant issue by Mauss.

needing in the least to have recourse to the category of the gift.⁶⁸

Derrida's analysis of Mauss' reasoning is that Mauss wants to make the point that gift is the point of departure for the entire economic system:

Now, the gift necessarily entails the notion of credit. The evolution in economic law has not been from barter to sale, and from cash sale to credit sale. On the one hand, barter has arisen through a system of presents given and reciprocated according to a time limit. This was through a process of simplification, by reductions in periods of time formerly arbitrary. On the other hand, buying and selling arose in the same way, with the latter according to a fixed time limit, or by cash, as well as by lending.⁶⁹

The valuable point of Derrida's analysis is that Mauss is "thinking the economic rationality of credit on the basis of the gift and not the reverse. The gift would be originary. It would be the true producer of value, being in itself the value of values."⁷⁰ In this way gift is fully integrated – and given an honoured place – in the economy.

Derrida's Economy

Jacques Derrida's entire critique of gift – per Mauss or otherwise – is that gift cannot be a commerce, an economy. He has made this case with clarity, depth, and insight. But there is a second part, another side to the writer's analysis. This is that for all practical purposes gift can not happen without self-annulling consequences – i.e. debt, credit, return gift, etc. Specifically, Derrida maintains that the giver of a gift always in some way expects or anticipates or actually receives a return, a compensation, an exchange, credit, and that the person receiving a gift in some way always must repay. It is this second step – which creates Derrida's *aporia* – that needs much more scrutiny. And it is because of the way these questions are dealt with – or not dealt with – by Derrida

⁶⁸Derrida, 41-2.

⁶⁹Mauss, 36.

⁷⁰Derrida, 44.

that I speak of Derrida's "economy."

Derrida goes to great length to make his point about the inevitable return of "gift." The outlines of his argument are as follow:

In order for there to be gift, gift event, some "one" has to give some "thing" to someone other, without which "giving" would be meaningless.⁷¹

For there to be gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift, whether this restitution is immediate or whether it is programmed by a complex calculation of a long-term deferral or difference.⁷²

For there to be a gift, *it is necessary* that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt. . . . Is it thus necessary, at the limit, that he not *recognize* the gift as gift. If he recognizes it *as gift*, if the gift *appears to him as such*, if the present is present to him *as present*, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place, let us say, of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent.⁷³

It suffices therefore for the other to *perceive the gift* – not only to perceive it in the sense in which, as one says in French, "on *perçoit*," one receives, for example, merchandise, payment, or compensation – but to perceive its nature of gift, the meaning or intention, the *intentional meaning* of the gift, in order for this simple *recognition* of the gift *as gift, as such*, to annul the gift as gift even before *recognition* becomes *gratitude*. The simple identification of the gift seems to destroy it.⁷⁴

But the one who gives [the gift] must not see it or know it either; otherwise he begins, at the threshold, as soon as he intends to give, to pay himself with a symbolic recognition, to praise himself, to approve of himself, to gratify himself, to congratulate himself, to give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given or what he is preparing to give.⁷⁵

⁷¹Derrida, 11.

⁷²Derrida, 12.

⁷³Derrida, 13.

⁷⁴Derrida, 14.

⁷⁵Derrida, 14.

For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift. . . . For there to be gift, not only must the donor or donee not perceive or receive the gift as such, have no consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition; he or she must also forget it right away and moreover this forgetting must be so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic categoriality of forgetting. This forgetting of the gift must even no longer be forgetting in the sense of repression. It must not give rise to any of the repressions that reconstitute debt and exchange by putting in reserve,(etc. etc.)⁷⁶

The simple intention to give, insofar as it carries the intentional meaning of the gift, suffices to make a return payment to oneself.⁷⁷

That is why, if there is gift, it cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects, things, or symbols.⁷⁸

John Caputo, who has been the principle English commentator on Derrida, is even more categorical in his interpretation of Derrida:

For when a gift produces a debt of gratitude – *and when does it not?* – it puts the beneficiary in the debt of the benefactor, who thus, by giving, takes and so gains credit. Hence there is no gift. . . .⁷⁹

Presents always come home, right away or after some time.....⁸⁰

The mere consciousness of giving sends the gift hurtling back to the donor...⁸¹

I have quoted Derrida – as well as Caputo – at such length because I think it helps to show what I mean by saying Derrida’s very critique of the economy of gift is based on economic or exchange thinking. Derrida ultimately seems to see any linkage, any relationship that occurs or that

⁷⁶Derrida, 16.

⁷⁷Derrida, 23.

⁷⁸Derrida, 24.

⁷⁹John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 160. Emphasis added.

⁸⁰Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 162.

⁸¹Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 163.

can possibly occur, any “post-gift” event, as an economy or a return. Never does Derrida say why this is so, or what makes it true. It is not his definition of gift that is problematic, it is his unfounded insistence that based on that definition gift is impossible.

For example, consider the above statement: “The simple identification of the gift *seems to* destroy it.” (Emphasis added) It is not difficult to understand what Derrida is saying here: If one recognises something as a gift, then everything else follows – especially indebtedness, but also a recognition that if it is a gift there must be a (self-serving) intention behind it, or at the core of it. But why is this so? Is there some “law of reciprocity” that governs all conceivable realms – natural, physical, psychological, spiritual – and dictates that whatever happens after ‘A’ is in fact a return to ‘A’? Is every cause and effect relationship – not only gift – a return, and if so why is this so?

Or consider this Derrida statement: “The simple intention to give, insofar as it carries the intentional meaning of the gift, suffices to make a return payment to oneself.” Again, what Derrida is saying is clear – that the intention already contains the self-understanding that it is a *good* intention, and therefore is already rewarding itself. But why is this so? If this is a possibility, is it therefore a necessity? I suggest rather that the only reason for thinking of exchange or economy in such a categorical way is that Derrida himself has not ventured to think outside of exchange.

In commenting on Derrida’s thought on gift Jean-Luc Marion says the following:

Even mere recognition *can* function as a price to be paid in return, *sometimes* a burden more difficult to discharge than its weight in gold. Consequently, the gift would immediately regress to the status, however honorable, of an exchange, where reciprocity (real or wished-for) would reestablish pure commerce. The receiver of the gift, if he remains visible and accessible, can therefore disqualify all its givenness; his mere presence makes it possible to appoint him as cause and to inscribe the gift within an economy. *No doubt it is just a possibility*, but this – even without an actual demand for repayment – is enough to set a price, an intention, an exchange

value for the so-called gift.⁸²

This truly amazing statement – in which I believe Marion accurately reflects Derrida’s position – says, on the one hand, that all of the available space outside the “bounds” of pure gift is occupied by exchange. There is pure gift, and presumably pure exchange, and everything else – everything in between – is also exchange.⁸³ But secondly, note the use of “can,” “sometimes,” and especially “No doubt it is just a possibility”. Indeed! If it is “just a possibility,” why are such remarkably categorical statements so characteristic of Derrida’s analysis?⁸⁴ What else might be just a possibility? Caputo’s question quoted above (in which he asks when a gift does not produce a debt) – meant to be rhetorical – is precisely to the point. If the answer is anything other than never, then Derrida’s entire construct on gift collapses, because “the impossible” is categorical.

Derrida’s Rules

It is difficult to read Derrida’s writing – or that of his disciples – on gifts without being struck by the frequency of categorical and absolutist language. This is especially the case in his discussion of gift. I am reluctant to add further lengthy quotes here, but note the imperatives which I have emphasised in the following from *Given Time*:

As the condition for a gift to be given, this forgetting **must** be radical not only on the part of the donee but first of all, if one can say here first of all, on the part of the donor. It is also on the part of the donor ‘subject’ that the gift not only **must not** be repaid but **must not** be kept in memory, retained as a symbol of a sacrifice, as symbolic in general. For the symbol immediately engages one in restitution. To tell

⁸²Marion, 86 (emphasis added).

⁸³Elsewhere Caputo speaks eloquently about the space between gift and exchange: “Now, it is never a question of simply choosing between these two, between ‘economy’ and the ‘gift’ (that’s something of a rule . . . in deconstruction to be invoked whenever you run up against a distinction that is passing itself off as strict). ‘We’ ‘agent/subjects’ are always to be found somewhere ‘between’ the two, *in medias res*, in the gap or space between the gift, if there is one, and economy....” John Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 145.

⁸⁴See *Derrida’s Rules* below.

the truth, the gift **must not** even appear or signify, consciously or unconsciously, as gift for the donors, whether individual or collective subjects.⁸⁵

Or the following from the same work:

For there to be gift, not only **must** the donor or donee not perceive or receive the gift as such, have **no** consciousness of it, **no** memory, **no** recognition; he or she **must** also forget it right away and moreover this forgetting **must be** so radical that it exceeds even the psychoanalytic categoriality of forgetting. This forgetting of the gift **must** even no longer be forgetting in the sense of repression. It **must not** give rise to (etc.)⁸⁶

Apart from specific absolutist words, the tone of both Caputo and Derrida when speaking of gift is devoid of any uncertainty. Speaking in absolutes seems unlikely territory for deconstructionists,⁸⁷ but it is equally implausible when speaking of gifts. If gift – possible or impossible, real or illusory – is that which breaks through the boundaries of the circle, that which ruptures exchange, one might well be reluctant to subject it to rules or means of confinement, or to suggest that it can be controlled definitionally and understood, or owned enough to apply absolutes to it.

Philosopher Adriaan Peperzak speaks pointedly to Derrida's position on gift when he says:

It is obvious that egoistic intentions can pervert every activity or disposition, including love, donation, praying, and consoling. However, the perverted character of perversions is as visible as the authenticity of unperverted loving, giving, praying and so on. To perceive the difference, one needs discernment, which is a skill that must be learned. . . . some arguments for the impossibility of giving display a lack of expertise in discernment, by skipping over *the crucial difference between the occurrence of satisfaction that is the normal consequence of certain actions – which, therefore may normally be expected – and a satisfaction that is intended as the “for the sake of which” of an action.* That a generous person enjoys generous actions (including his own) is normal. But to consider myself generous because I know how to create the appearance of giving is perverse. The

⁸⁵Derrida, 23.

⁸⁶Derrida, 16.

⁸⁷See Caputo quote in footnote above. Speaking of distinctions that pass themselves off as strict . . . !

difference between both kinds of giving and (self-) satisfaction can be perceived.⁸⁸

Webb's Gift

In his book *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess*, Stephen Webb investigates the theme of gift in the context of religion. Specifically the author attempts to relate “the divine excess to human preoccupations with reciprocity.”⁸⁹ Webb formulates the problem in terms of tempering the concept of divine excess to allow for human response, while at the same time containing reciprocity to maintain the unconditional nature of God’s giving. Predictably, he attempts to find a hybrid between what he calls excess (giving outside of reciprocity) and reciprocity.

In the course of his work Webb covers the breadth of commentary on the subject, from Mauss to Hyde to Derrida to Bataille, as well as any writer on gift. I will touch upon some of the theological issues raised by Webb in a later chapter; here once again I want to remain focussed on the writer’s perspective on the gift/exchange relationship.

Webb begins with an understanding of God’s giving as excessive. This does not mean that God gives chaotically, without purpose or design (intentionality), but the purpose is that human beings in “response” give as God gives to us:

God’s giving is initially hyperbolic, or, in other words, it is excessive because it initiates all of our own giving. . . Primordial giving does not originate according to the logic of a free act of the will but follows the desire that is embedded in the act of giving.⁹⁰

For Webb this is another way of saying that God is love. God’s originary giving – excessively, outside of economy – wills and empowers our own giving. Its “benevolent intention” is that we give

⁸⁸Adriaan Peperzak, “Giving” in Wyschogrod, 168 (emphasis added).

⁸⁹Webb, 123.

⁹⁰Webb, 139.

further. While there may be gratitude toward God's love or giving that resembles a return, Webb says that understanding God as an excessive outpouring of love/gifts in a sense overcomes any return to God.

“...the problems of excess should not lead to exchange as an answer. The end point of gifting – a community that responds to giving with further giving, creating relationships of obligation and responsibility – should not be read into the beginning of the process...God wants us to give...as God gives, excessively.”⁹¹

And it is the same excessive giving – not the measured exchange – that God's giving “seeks.”

...the gratuitous God of Christianity does not summon gratitude as either dependence or exchange; instead, the divine giver begets further giving, the obligation to continue the gift, not to substitute giving with the attitude of thanksgiving. The antieconomy of gifting is dynamic, inclusive, and expansive.⁹²

The author argues that God's excessive love/giving becomes in us the Christian ethic:

To go too far in the name of the other is to wager that hyperbole makes sense, that too much, sometimes, is just right. The strange logic of this rhetoric of giving enables us to solicit excess not as an intoxicating experience or as a means to a moderate ethics of neighborliness, but as a conjunction of style and praxis that conjures and creates the bold and vigorous desire that finds the self in the other.⁹³

Whether or not gift is possible seems not so much a concern for Webb; in fact he seems to embrace the impossibility of imitating God's excessive gift:

...theological rhetoric must seek to promote the impossible. A desire for the other overfunded by the reckless giving of the Ultimate Other is a point worth trying to make, even as that very point unmakes and confounds all of our attempts to grasp what we can never reach and to speak what we can never know.⁹⁴

I have no doubt that Derrida would see Webb's attempt to hybridise excessive and

⁹¹Webb, 139.

⁹²Webb, 146-147.

⁹³Webb, 140-141.

⁹⁴Webb, 141.

reciprocal gift as one that in no way evades the return of the gift. But what is worth noting in Webb is that despite his partial embrace of return, his understanding of gift is much more linear and expansive than circular. The movement of the gift is a movement on, not a movement back. Webb uses the metaphor of God's gift of Jesus as a way of showing that the giver must essentially disappear in the gift, and that this "leaves us free to do with it what we will." As a result, every gift is a new event despite its connection to prior gift. The repetition of these new events "also means that there is no single shape of the gift; giving is always multiple...giving never has a simple beginning or a single conclusion because giving goes on and on."⁹⁵

Vaughan's Gift

Like Mauss, Genevieve Vaughan leaves no doubt about the subject of her book from the title and subtitle, *For-Giving; A Feminist Criticism of Exchange*.⁹⁶ More than any other writer Vaughan is clear and categorical in stating that what she calls "unilateral giftgiving" is distinct from exchange, operates outside of the "laws" of reciprocity, and is possible. For Vaughan, exchange has subverted and coopted giftgiving, and her book is dedicated to reversing that trend and to rehabilitating unilateral giftgiving.

Because of the uniquely frontal attack that Vaughan launches against exchange, and the direct relevance of her critique to my thesis, I will examine her approach at some length.⁹⁷ An

⁹⁵Webb, 147.

⁹⁶Also see Genevieve Vaughan, "Mothering, Co-muni-cation, and the Gifts of Language," in Wyschogrod, 91-116.

⁹⁷In my comments I make little reference to what is in fact a major theme of Vaughan's book, namely that exchange is associated with masculation, and giftgiving with women and nurture. Vaughan directly links the suppression of the gift paradigm by exchange to the historical oppression of women by men. I think the author's case is convincing, and an appreciation of this central aspect of her argument is essential to understanding her work. I hope that the structure of Vaughan's work can however be made clear by accepting this foundation of historic male domination as a given, and focussing on the themes of exchange and gift themselves.

introduction to the author's general critique of exchange will be followed by three related discussions; of Vaughan's understanding of needs, of the concept of turn-taking as opposed to reciprocity, and of the bonds created by unilateral gift giving.

The critique of exchange

The essential argument of *For-Giving* is that unilateral gift-giving is the primary and original paradigm of life, the "basic mode of human interaction." It is characterised by giving to the needs of others, and the archetype of this giving is a mother's care for a child, or in a more general sense, nurturing.⁹⁸ Giving to needs

creates bonds between givers and receivers. Recognising someone's need, and acting to satisfy it, convinces the giver of the existence of the other, while receiving something from someone else that satisfies a need proves the existence of the other to the receiver.⁹⁹

Unilateral gift giving involves a giver, a gift, and a receiver, but there is no return gift, no exchange. This fundamental paradigm of life is ubiquitous and "present everywhere in our lives," though by its very "giving" nature it gives way to other more dominant paradigms, in particular the "exchange" paradigm. Vaughan finds this same pattern in the structure and use of language. Words are given to satisfy needs of others. We communicate in order to give others information that is in some way important to them, and therefore responds to a need. In sum, giving and receiving gifts "are prior to and necessary for our human way of knowing. They are the basis of a universal grammar, not only of language, but of life."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Throughout the book there is an unaddressed assumption that the gift paradigm is not limited to humans, but that rather it is more fundamentally rooted in the patterns and interrelationships of the natural world. Vaughan concludes her book with speculation on the sun/earth relationship as the source of the gift paradigm.

⁹⁹Vaughan, 30.

¹⁰⁰Vaughan, 46.

Exchange on the other hand requires an equivalent return; what Vaughan refers to as “the doubling of the gift.”¹⁰¹ It focusses on what is returned rather than what is given, self-interest rather than the need of the other. Vaughan sees the exchange paradigm – which she equates with patriarchy and male domination, or “masculation” – as progressively overtaking the gift paradigm throughout human history, resulting in the alienation of individuals from each other, and exploitation of the natural world.

It is important to understand this historical perspective advanced by Vaughan in order to appreciate her view of gift and exchange. Most of the perspectives I have considered already have understood gift as an early or archaic form of the exchange paradigm. Vaughan on the other hand views exchange as a deviant form of the gift paradigm.

In the view of the writer the model for exchange emerged from verbal patterns. Language in general is to Vaughan a central component of the gift paradigm. Through speech one gives information or communication that has a strong other-orientation. Through language one gives to another person information that can be useful to them, that they can use in response to their needs.

The aspects of language in which exchange finds its model is definition and naming. Both of these processes emphasise equivalency, categorisation, and classification. A definition must be equivalent to the word it defines; it creates an equation, often using the verb “to be.” (“A cat is a domestic feline.”) It then allows one to substitute the name given (cat) for anything that one judges to be equivalent to the definition, changing the focus from difference to sameness or equivalency.

Following this model, exchange for Vaughan is contrasted to the gift paradigm in several significant ways. Each of these is directly related to the issue of “return” of the gift, or reciprocity.

¹⁰¹Wyschogrod, 92

Artificiality of exchange

First, for Vaughan the gift system is the natural, original paradigm, while exchange is “artificially” derived. The author traces the origin of exchange to language. In language, definitions and names take the place of other words and thereby function as communicative gifts; exchange co-opts this pattern in the material realm, where one gift is substituted for another.¹⁰²

Ego-orientation

Second, exchange eliminates the other-orientation of gift-giving, elevating instead a self or ego focus, through an inevitable concern for what is received back when something is given. The orientation toward responding to the need of the other is one of the central characteristics of gift for Vaughan. Exchange, however, responds to others’ needs only as a means to satisfying the need of the self or the giver. The heart of exchange is the return of equivalence, thus attention is focussed on what is received. The process feeds itself, as the attention to the self finds more and more needs that must be fed by further exchange. Vaughan suggests that this is because serving one’s own needs isolates one from others, who might otherwise have provided nurture. The compulsion to care for one’s self leads to systems of oppression and coercion being used to obtain the needed nurture.¹⁰³ While exchange purports to promote equality – through an equal value for things exchanged – it in fact only equalises the perceived self-interests of the parties involved.¹⁰⁴

Justice

Third, exchange gives emphasis to the values of justice, fairness, and equality over the value of need. The concept of justice leaves little place for need-focussed, other-orientation. Fairness and

¹⁰²Vaughan, chapter 4.

¹⁰³Vaughan, 32.

¹⁰⁴Vaughan, 49.

equality, key aspects of the idea of justice, focus attention on the similarity of the return; justice is seen in terms of a punishment (return) that fits the crime rather than the perpetrator. Vaughan advocates for kindness rather than justice.

Relationship

Fourth, exchange devalues the affective bonds or relationships that are created through gift-giving and instead creates an adversarial relationship. A primary attention to the needs of the ego results in people who are independent of and isolated from others.

Scarcity

Fifth, exchange requires and creates scarcity. This goes against the common wisdom that scarcity is a result of giving away and that abundance comes from acquiring and keeping through exchange. When one asks the question “how much can I afford to give” for example, one assumes that giving creates scarcity. Vaughan maintains that this is true because gift giving is functioning within the context of exchange. Exchange requires scarcity, because it is only in a context of limited supply and heightened demand that people can be compelled to participate in the exchange system:

. . .the system has to create the scarcity as the prerequisite of exchange – because giftgiving in abundance subverts exchange by making it unnecessary. As the monetized economy expands, it occupies the space that previously was available for gift production and consumption, making it difficult for those not participating in exchange to survive.¹⁰⁵

Profits

Sixth, exchange subverts gifts to create profit. By focussing our attention on what I receive through exchange, on making sure that I receive equivalency for what I give, the exchange system in fact results in the desire for profit, or more than what has been given. For Vaughan one person’s

¹⁰⁵Vaughan, 183.

profit represents someone else's uncompensated or free gift. "Profit is a free gift given to the exchanger by the other participants in the market and those who nurture them."¹⁰⁶

Surplus labour—that portion of the workers' labour time that is unpaid and goes towards the profit of the capitalist—can be considered as a gift under constraint, from the worker to the capitalist.¹⁰⁷

Needs and Gifts.

One of the most insightful aspects of Vaughan's analysis is her view of the relationship between needs and gifts. Typically needs and gifts are at opposite poles, and on the surface Vaughan's insistence that gifts are needs-focussed reinforces this view. But in fact she suggests a much more dynamic relationship. At the heart of Vaughan's view is the inter-relationship among needs, gifts, abundance and scarcity.

Needs should not be understood as lacks – according to Vaughan. Needs are “needed” by gifts; they function as a kind of gravity that draws gifts and uses them to create new gifts.¹⁰⁸ Without needs – without use – there are no gifts. In this way Vaughan points out that needs are “gifts to gifts.” It is central to the author's argument that exchange draws gifts away from the other's need by focussing on the equivalency of the return, and ultimately on profit. Through exchange, gifts are taken out of circulation and become private property. This creates scarcity, as noted above, further discouraging gifts.

Vaughan insists upon the creativity of needs. They form an essential part of the chain by which gifts move – not in a return to the giver, but in an ever expanding proliferation of gifts and needs. Using the metaphor of the sun in relationship to the earth, Vaughan suggests that a need is

¹⁰⁶Vaughan, 34.

¹⁰⁷Vaughan, 59.

¹⁰⁸This resembles Lewis Hyde's assertion that gifts “move toward the empty place” (Hyde, 23).

similar to an ecological niche, created by the earth to receive the gift of energy from the sun. That niche (need, empty place) in turn uses the gift it receives creatively, becoming a gift to the receivers that evolve to fill the niche. For Vaughan, it is the other's need that validates the gift, by receiving it creatively.

Turn-taking and return

One of the primary distinctions between the exchange and the gift paradigms for Vaughan is that exchange involves a reciprocal return and gift does not. The "other orientation" – which is the most critical aspect of Vaughan's view of gift giving – responds in large part to this issue. The gift is a response to the other's need; it is not an investment or an exchange. Yet there is in Vaughan's understanding of gift a definite movement, an expansion of the gift, which ultimately involves givers and receivers alike. If gift-giving creates bonds and relationships, as Vaughan insists, how can there be no return? A bond is bi-directional.

Vaughan's response to this dilemma is that the interaction between a particular giver and receiver should be understood as "turn-taking" rather than return. This term conveys a distinct nuance to the movement that takes place in gift giving and receiving, but it does not really put to rest the question of return. Unfortunately, Vaughan does not anywhere elaborate at length the distinction between reciprocity or return and turn-taking. One can infer that it is in part the *intention* or motivation that is at issue:

Turn-taking occurs when individuals give unilateral gifts sequentially, without *intending* to cause the receiver to give an equivalent in return.¹⁰⁹

Elsewhere it seems that the pervasiveness of exchange compels Vaughan to abandon the term *reciprocity* entirely in favour of *turn-taking*, even though the distinction is not in the word itself:

¹⁰⁹Vaughan in Wyschogrod, 97 (emphasis added).

We look at the world through the glasses of exchange so we may tend to see turn-taking as exchange. The *motivation* in turn-taking is not constrained reciprocity, but sharing, alternating giving and receiving, and communication. ¹¹⁰

It is also the issue of obligation or constraint that distinguishes the two concepts:

The exchange (if it is constrained and seen through our capitalistic eyes) or turn-taking (if it is not). . . ¹¹¹

Turn-taking may never-the-less be an unfortunate choice of terms, as it suggests an alternating rhythm that suspiciously resembles exchange. While it is not addressed explicitly, Vaughan's understanding implies that gift-giving as a paradigm always leads beyond the one-to-one relationship, implicating the entire community and ultimately the entire world.¹¹²

Bonds and relationships

In his book *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss repeatedly makes the point that to a considerable degree the purpose of gift exchange in "archaic" societies is to create bonds and relationships, which in turn result in a peaceful and stable society.

To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality. Also one gives because one is compelled to do so, because the recipient possesses some kind of right of property over anything that belongs to the donor. This ownership is expressed and conceived of as a spiritual bond. ¹¹³

Vaughan makes a similar claim for her understanding of unilateral gift giving in the following quote already cited:

¹¹⁰Vaughan, 37 footnote 2 (emphasis added).

¹¹¹Vaughan, 55.

¹¹²"Active giving and receiving, turn-taking, is appropriate behavior between two persons (as well as between them and the rest of society) and can take place without involving giving in order to receive." Vaughan, 370.

¹¹³Mauss, 13.

[G]iving to needs creates bonds between givers and receivers. Recognizing someone's need, and acting to satisfy it, convinces the giver of the existence of the other, while receiving something from someone else that satisfies a need proves the existence of the other to the receiver.¹¹⁴

While both perspectives concern themselves with social and community bonds and relationships, there is a very clear difference between them. Mauss' gift is one that is often received with mixed feelings, because it is essentially an aggressive act. If the refusal of a gift is "tantamount to declaring war," then offering that gift is itself a threat of war, and accepting it is almost a tactical surrender. As Mauss acknowledges, and as Vaughan notes, there is nothing joyful about this kind of gift exchange:

The gift is therefore at one and the same time what should be done, what should be received, and yet what is dangerous to take. This is because the thing that is given itself forges a bilateral, irrevocable bond, above all when it consists of food. The recipient is dependent upon the anger of the donor, and each is even dependent on the other.¹¹⁵

It seems to [Mauss and followers] that giftgiving is just a variation on exchange, with a longer pay back time and less emphasis upon equality. The bonds still seem to be caused by constrained reciprocity, rather than by the direct satisfaction of needs.¹¹⁶

In unilateral giftgiving, the constraints and the "threat" of Mauss' gift exchange are gone.

Vaughan's view is that relationships can be created through what she calls the direct satisfaction of needs. In exchange, the goal of social interaction is the benefit of the self. While exchange can provide a structure to such interaction that may be mistaken for relationship, it cannot really build a mutual relationship because the focus is directed toward individual interest. Giving to the need of the other is relational because it is other focussed.

It is not entirely clear how Vaughan sees the mutuality of relationships developing through

¹¹⁴Vaughan, 30.

¹¹⁵Mauss, 59.

¹¹⁶Vaughan, 54.

unilateral gift giving, short of the concept of turn-taking, which as I have raised above is itself unclear. At some points she seems to suggest that it is a sense of gratitude from the receiver that contributes to the relationship.¹¹⁷ But elsewhere Vaughan alludes to a more subtle appreciation of how the relationship is formed. There are two aspects to this. First, when a gift is given to the need of an other, the giver is in a sense highlighting the gift and its potential relationship to the need of the other. This draws the attention of the other to this same value, and results in a kind of shared value that Vaughan understands as an aspect of relationship.

Second, Vaughan believes that giving and receiving precede and give rise to knowledge.¹¹⁸ When we receive gifts focussed on our needs, our knowledge of that gift, the awareness of its relevance to our needs, is gratitude. Giving unilaterally based on the need of the other implies the attribution of value to the other; in this sense the gift itself is symbolic. But Vaughan goes further in showing that the receiver whose needs are met also attributes value to the giver, acknowledging the significance of the giver in our nurture.¹¹⁹

In this chapter I have shown that the issue of the obligated return of the gift is very much at the centre of reflections by different writers on gift giving and receiving. For Mauss, giving, receiving and reciprocating are obligatory dimensions of the social order of archaic societies. Hyde's most useful contribution is to point out that the movement which results from gift is not really a return

¹¹⁷For example, "When we receive the satisfaction of our needs by others (and the consequent implication of our value for them), we can appreciate what has been given to us, and the others as its source, in gratitude."(Vaughan, 161) Gratitude in this sense is of course for Derrida a return gift.

¹¹⁸Jean-Luc Marion begins *Being Given* with this quote from Novalis: "We cannot know anything on our own; all real knowledge must be given to us." Marion, 1.

¹¹⁹Vaughan, 163-164. Again the author insists this is not an exchange, but "taking upon ourselves the giver as model, we nurture in our turns."

movement, but one that sends the gift further along, in unexpected directions. Derrida suggests that gift is a conflicted concept, and therefore in some sense “impossible,” since in his view *giving* always *takes*. However his observations themselves use an absolutist and exchange logic which seem inimical to gift. While Webb attempts to find a middle way between “excess” and return, he clearly views gift as an unclosed process, with every gift a new event. Vaughan views gift and exchange as a clash of contrasting paradigms, insisting that gift is a unilateral response to the need of the other which creates relatedness rather than return.

It would be difficult to harmonise these diverse perspectives on gift. What becomes clear is that there is significant space for understanding gift as a phenomenon which can function differently from exchange in the crucial areas of whether or not there is a return to the “giver,” and whether other-interest is really possible.

Chapter 4: Gift and the Religious Perspective

I had slowly come to understand that all wealth has its origin in a gift relationship, beginning with the gift of life itself. That through the ages of human community on this planet, through its oldest and deepest wisdom, ways had been found to acknowledge that gift and so keep it and ourselves alive. Receipt was acknowledged by what came to be our words of prayer and thanksgiving. The words were marked by precious and magical objects. The objects were valued and exchanged because they bespoke the gift and reenacted the giving. (Jerry Martien)

Elsewhere in this essay I have stated that religion is the true home of the gift. What does this mean? Is it true? If so, what kind of a home has religion been for gift? How does approaching gift via religion change, help, or further clarify the understanding of gift? More specifically, what is to be learned about return and reciprocity through reflection on gift in religion?

One of the functions of religion for many people is that religion situates those numerous things that defy understanding and are commonly understood as “mystery.” I do not refer simply to things that we do not *yet* understand – things which, in an evolutionary scientific view of knowledge, lie still beyond the horizon of discovery – but also, and perhaps especially, those phenomena we “understand,” but which inter-relate and occur in complex and unexpected ways that we cannot comprehend or predict. Here I am distinguishing between *mystery* and the *unknown*. The acknowledgement and incorporation of mystery gives religion purpose.

Mystery is also an essential part of gift, because gifts open us to space that is undefined and uncharted. Reciprocity or exchange, by contrast, eliminates imbalance, quantifies, assigns value, and defines. It is first and foremost a construct emphasising balance and evenness, equality and fairness. In exchange all is exposed and put on the scale. As I have already discussed at length, gift represents a radical breaking with exchange, and it is in this sense that I believe religion is the proper home of gift.

The following study of gift in the religious context relies on broad observations from African Traditional Religions¹²⁰ and from the Judaic/Christian traditions.¹²¹ My approach will be to group these observations around three areas. First, I believe it is very important to look at creation stories and understandings of creation in order to understand the concept of “original gift”; that is, gift without precedent. Second, under the heading of “false gift,” I will outline the advent of the theme of reciprocity and exchange in religion. Third, I will review the dilemma posed by the theme of ownership and possession.

The Original Gift

Religion inevitably attempts to provide a framework for thinking about how human beings (do, can, ought to) relate to the world and things in it, including other human beings. This broad, general statement doesn’t tell us much, but it makes the point that a critical problem that religion takes on is relatedness and relationship. Religion generally begins with description – accounts of origins and creations – but the purpose of that description is prescription. The origin and creation accounts are inevitably shaped with the assumption that “initial” events have some special validity as templates or models for subsequent moral and ethical relationships, and that the moral and ethical

¹²⁰I am aware of the discussion that African Traditional Religions are one and should be referred to in the singular—for example as argued by Laurenti Magesa in *African Religion*— but I choose to use the plural and the singular interchangeably, for two reasons. First, I do not find the unity argument convincing. There are many commonalities among many different religions, and many points of underlying unity. But there is no “natural law” of religious speciation, and to claim that many things are in fact the same thing is by definition arbitrary. Second, the argument for and against understanding African Religions as singular rather than plural has nearly always been made with the implicit or explicit assumption that unity or oneness is qualitatively or morally better, a perspective I completely reject.

¹²¹Based on observations from these religions I make a number of generalisations about religion in general in relationship to gift and exchange. This study, and such statements in particular, would obviously be strengthened by specifically looking at gift in other religious traditions, but that would make this essay too long. I have tried to avoid such generalisations when they seem obviously unwarranted.

content of these events is relatively accessible and readily available.¹²²

Creation stories, then, are often the point of departure for religions. Laurenti Magesa states categorically that “The fundamental element, or foundational ‘principle,’ so to speak, of African religious life and thought centres on the fact of creation.”¹²³ Creation accounts give various explanations for how the world came into being. In doing so they also provide initial information about the agent of creation, about God. And finally, creation accounts, as stories told or written by human beings, speak to the place of humanity in relationship both to the creator(s) and to other things and beings.

Creation accounts are by definition more than – or other than – informational. As noted above, they inevitably speak – metaphorically or directly – of purpose, intention, or will. Again, this pedagogical aspect is assumed in religion. This is the first principle to acknowledge: that according to most religions there is intentionality in creation and in the advent of life, whether that purpose is explained directly or shrouded in mystery.

Secondly, creation stories attribute everything – all matter, all life – to God. This seems self-evident since it is difficult to imagine purpose without agent/s, but it should be stated nevertheless because it is an essential aspect of how gift is understood in the context of religion.

Third, creation stories show that everything created is *given* by God. Many religions explicitly refer to creation as a gift. In a general sense, creation of any kind is necessarily given. Even

¹²²The attribution of a unique moral content to “original” occurrences, events, patterns, or stories *because they were original or first*, indicates an underlying assumption of a will and intentionality behind these events. Without that assumption there is no reason to look to the origins for patterns with moral/ethical content. “Initial” events could just as well be unfortunate mistakes that were subsequently corrected, unless a “guiding hand” is assumed.

¹²³Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997) 248.

those creations – such as works of art, or inventions – that enter directly into the world of exchange must first of all be in some sense given or “presented,” otherwise they cannot be recognised as creations. With regards to our subject, the alternative to creation being given is that God *keeps* creation, in which case intentionality and purpose—not to mention gift—would have no meaning.

This outlines the basis of the concept of original gift. Original gift refers to gift which has no precedent, which is not in any way a response to, or motivated by, a prior gift. All other gifts subsequent to creation cannot be “original gifts” because they can always be linked to preceding gifts.¹²⁴ I have noted elsewhere the idea that gifts move on rather than return, and that as such all gifts are connected. The religious traditions being considered here assert that there was a beginning point of this chain of gifts, an initial gift event, without precedent and unrepeatable. It is difficult to conceive of religion generally without this fundamental claim that everything has been initially given. For our purposes this is important because this original act of giving serves as the model for understanding gift in the context of religion.

Original gift, or creation, is understood in relatively similar terms by African Traditional Religions and by the Judaic/Christian religions. Among African theologians there are many debates about various aspects of African Traditional Religions, but there is wide agreement on the overall question of God’s purpose in the world. This purpose can be summarised in two related points: first, God’s intention is the maintenance and expansion of life; and second, this can only happen in a

¹²⁴This points to one of the (many) problems with Mauss’ idea that reciprocity or the return of the gift is explained by the fact that the spirit of the original giver is in the gift, and that spirit wants to return to its origin. It does not seem possible to think of any gift that really “originates” with one who gives it. Everything given has already been received, just as everything received has already been given, and this is true whether or not one believes in a God that created. Rodolphe Gasché critiques Mauss on this very point, stating that “the fixed point of departure to which one could return does not exist, and with it collapses the possibility of thinking something such as originary propriety or property.” (Rodolphe Gasché, “Heliocentric Exchange,” *The Logic of the Gift*, ed. Alan Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997) 115.) Derrida makes references to “gift as first mover of the circle” which is similarly problematic. Apart from creation *ex nihilo* there is no original gift, there is no first mover, no beginning of the circle.

context of relationship, of the inter-relatedness of the entire created order.

Martin Nkemnkia notes that in African Religion, the world is created for the life that it subsequently generates.¹²⁵ Laurenti Magesa draws on a wide variety of African theologians to carry this a step further, noting that all morality in turn focuses on making life more abundant and allowing it to thrive:

For African Religion, all principles of morality and ethics are to be sought within the context of preserving human life and its 'power' or 'force.'¹²⁶

For what is demanded as the ultimate good is that life be preserved and perpetuated in every way possible, in its past, present and future forms.¹²⁷

The sole purpose of existence, however, is to seek life, to see to it that human life continues and grows to its full capacity.¹²⁸

. . . the foundation and purpose of the ethical perspective of African Religion is life, life in its fullness. Everything is perceived with reference to this.¹²⁹

Bujo makes a similar case:

The main goal of African ethics is fundamentally life itself. The community must guarantee the promotion and protection of life by specifying or ordaining ethics and morality.¹³⁰

The morality of an act is determined by its life-giving potential: good acts are those which contribute to the community's vital force, whereas bad acts, however

¹²⁵Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia, *African Vitalogy: A Step Forward in African Thinking*, trans. Christopher Mallia (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999) 127.

¹²⁶Magesa, 38.

¹²⁷Magesa, 65.

¹²⁸Magesa, 55.

¹²⁹Magesa, 77.

¹³⁰Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000) 2.

apparently insignificant, are those which tend to diminish life.¹³¹

The account of creation in Genesis 1 makes a similar point in several ways.¹³² First, it emphasises a diversity of different kinds of life. For example, not only are different categories of life mentioned – plants, sea life, winged life and land life – but further classifications are enumerated, such as vegetation, plants yielding seed, fruit trees, sea creatures, cattle, creeping things, wild animals.

Second, a clear sense of expansion and proliferation is stressed by the language of diversity and proliferation. In one translation the word “every” (every tree, every kind) is used twenty times in the chapter. Phrases like “bring forth” give the same sense of fertility and fecundity. Verse 20 states “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures. . .,” and verse 24 “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind . . .” Twice in the chapter the specific command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (verse 22, 28) is given.

Finally, the creation process is punctuated with repeated assertions that “God saw that it was good.” This implies moral purpose and direction in creation and the expansion of life from the earth.

The second affirmation of African Traditional Religions is that the purpose of abundant life can be accomplished only through inter-relatedness and relationships. This speaks on the one hand to relationships among different parts of creation:

It bears emphasizing that human beings must be in harmony not only with animate beings but with the entire inanimate creation. Inanimate beings, far from being insignificant in the order of creation as African religion understands it, incarnate within themselves “vital energies” necessary for humanity. These energies, “alive” in their spirits, require linkage with the entire system of the universe. . . . All life – that of people, plants and animals, and the earth – originates and therefore shares an

¹³¹Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, trans. John O’Donohue (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1992) 22.

¹³²My references will be from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

intimate relationship of bondedness with divine life; all life is divine life.¹³³

Kamalu makes the same point:

It is a cornerstone of African ontology that nothing exists of itself, rather beings and things exist in relation to other beings and things. Hence, there is a dynamic interrelation between human beings and their environment. Relationships rather than ‘things’ are important.¹³⁴

The Genesis account makes the same point by the structural continuity of the different acts of creation. While some commentators like to emphasise supposed distinctions among different parts of creation,¹³⁵ these efforts seem very speculative. Verses 28 to 30 of chapter 1 outline interrelationships among different life forms, concluding with the global summary, “God saw *everything* that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Emphasis added.)

In addition to relatedness among different species of life and with inanimate creation, relationship is in particular of concern among human beings.

The realization of sociability or relationships in daily living by the individual and the community is the central moral and ethical imperative of African Religion. Relationships receive the most attention in the adjudication of what is good and bad, what is desirable and undesirable in life. Not only is the view of the universe at the service, so to speak, of the formation and execution of good relationships, but relationships make possible the continuing existence of the universe.¹³⁶

The person is not defined as an ontological act by means of self-realization, but by means of “relations.”¹³⁷

¹³³Magesa, 73.

¹³⁴Chukwunyere Kamalu, *Person, Divinity and Nature: a Modern View of the Person and the Cosmos in African Thought* (London: Karnak House, 1997) 159.

¹³⁵Suggesting, for example that it is significant that God commands the earth to bring forth vegetation and animals, as opposed to humans who are created “directly” by God. See for example notes to Genesis 1:20-23, *New Oxford Annotated Bible, p. 2 OT*.

¹³⁶Magesa, 65

¹³⁷Bujo, 88

Writers emphasise again and again the absolute centrality of relationships in African Religion. What is really at issue, as Nkemnkia says, is that “The God of the African is a God of the community or tribe and never a God exclusively addressed to a single person.”¹³⁸ Again, a similar perspective is reflected in the Genesis creation story, where humanity is created and addressed collectively.

What is the significance of this dual focus – that these religious traditions are concerned with the furtherance and expansion of life, and that this can happen only through interrelatedness – in terms of our interest in the theme of creation as gift? This significance lies in the fact that the giving that takes place in creation is a model that humans are to follow:

In all religions, but much more obviously in African Religion, the most general moral argument seems to be: “As God is and does, so human beings must be and do.”¹³⁹

Again, this understanding of God’s creation as a model for humans to follow finds resonance in Genesis 1. Whereas God’s creation is diverse, abundant, and fills the earth, so God’s blessings – first to the creatures of the sea and air (v.22), and then to humankind (v.28) – invite them to continue doing the same.

It is significant that in the structure of the creation accounts, God initiates “original gift” – gift that has no precursor and is therefore not a reciprocation. Humanity is to see these giving acts of God as a model for its own moral actions. Thus while there is a *causal* link between God’s “original gifts” and subsequent human action or giving, there is no *reciprocal* link. There is no hint of required sacrifice, offering, obligatory thanksgiving or gratitude. What is required (and that in the form of “blessing” rather than command), is “be fruitful and multiply.”

The fact, the intention, and the form of God’s giving through creation are all primary models

¹³⁸Nkemnkia, 143

¹³⁹Magesa, 45

for human action: God has “given” all creation, so humans are expected to give. God gives by means of relationship, so humans are to expand creation through greater interrelationship. And as God has given unilaterally for the “need” (expansion, growth) of creation, so humans are to give in the same way.

Genesis 1:29-30 uses the most stereotypical “need” – that of food – to show that God’s creation can best be understood as gift to need.

See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; *you shall have them for food.* (Gen. 1:29, emphasis added)

African religion as well is clear in understanding that resources are in the first instance meant to meet need, to further the common good. The privatisation of such resources is subject to “public right of access to the basic resources necessary for life.”¹⁴⁰ Magesa writes about the centrality of sharing in

African Religion:

The moral thought of African Religion becomes clear through the understanding of relationships. The refusal to share is wrong. It is, in fact, an act of destruction because it does not serve to cement the bonding that is required to form community. . . . Participation-sharing is thus a central principle or imperative for human existence in African Religion....¹⁴¹

In summary then, the initial, unilateral nature of God’s original gifts through creation, on the one hand, and the focus on the expansion of life on the other, provide a framework for an understanding of gift that is not based on reciprocity or return. This framework denies all boundaries and all exclusion.

In the views of African theologians, these themes are prominent and central in African

¹⁴⁰Magesa, 242.

¹⁴¹Magesa, 66-67.

Traditional Religion. While it is more difficult to excavate the Judaic/Christian traditions from subsequent capitalistic and individualistic interpretations, there is much in the common creation stories of these religions that reinforces these same themes.

False gift

If the idea of original gift represented by creation stories in many religions models a concept of gift freed from reciprocity and return, what becomes of this concept as one looks beyond the creation stories themselves? The answer to this question seems clear: the unilateral gift giving model of creation is quickly over-shadowed by reciprocal exchange. In the Judaic/Christian tradition this change is first represented by the concept of covenant. Like the creation stories and God's "covenant" with Noah, the story of the call of Abram in Genesis 12 is one of pure gift. Nothing is asked of Abram; God seeks him out. No collateral or equivalent commitment is required of Abram. But the covenant detailed in Genesis 17 is different:

"I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous. . . . As for me, this is my covenant with you. . . . I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding, and I will be their God. . . . As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations." (Vs.1-9)

Here the relationship formally changes. A deal is made, a new pattern is authenticated.¹⁴² It may be a good deal, a "sweet" deal, even a "steal," but it is a deal none the less. And the fact that land is involved – land that according to the creation accounts was to be inalienable from all of humanity – is particularly significant, because it is from the land that other gifts – life in all its forms – "come forth."

¹⁴²There are earlier examples in Genesis of reciprocity. For example, the story of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2:15 ff. is essentially an exchange story (do not eat / and you shall live). I believe Genesis 17 is particularly significant because it breaks with earlier covenant or gift forms.

The story of African Religion is no different. While the oral basis of African Traditional Religion makes it impossible to position the emergence of exchange chronologically, there is no question but that reciprocity is a dominant theme. Kamalu maintains that the principle of cosmic justice – i.e. retribution – is embodied by the Earth itself.

[T]here is a general understanding of a principle of reciprocation of moral action that is also a principle of operation of natural law. In other words, there is the belief that “what goes around, comes around.” Whatever a person does, whether good or bad, returns to him/her in some way. . . . there is a moral law of reciprocation and that a certain type of deed attracts one in its likeness.¹⁴³

African Religions emphasise that everything that happens has a cause, usually a human cause. It is likewise understood that there is a reward or a punishment for every action, and that the latter are effected in this life.

African proverbs are a rich source for the theme of reciprocity. Among many examples are the following, which consistently show giving as a balanced, reciprocal, and self-interested act:

To give away is to make provision for the future. (Lesotho)
One favours him from whom in the past one has received a gift. (Kikuyu)
You give he who gives you. (Kenya)
To give is to save; that is, not to throw away. (Swahili)
The hands that give you are the hands that receive. (Uganda)
He who gives to the poor receives the gratitude of God. (Africa)
A good deed is something one returns. (Guinea)
A kind heart enables one to get even the most hidden item. (Kenya)
If after pounding (for the neighbour) I eat no flour, I withhold my pestle. (Swahili)
The same basket which has put the millet in the store will also take it out. (Uganda)
The hand that gives, gathers. (Uganda)
He who has no gift will not be given anything. (Uganda)¹⁴⁴

In the Old Testament, the exchange paradigm is the norm in the law codes which stipulate punishments for various wrongs, emphasising balanced retribution (eye for an eye), but it is also

¹⁴³Kamalu, 88-89.

¹⁴⁴From an unpublished collection of African proverbs, Annetta Miller, Nairobi, Kenya.

reflected in the ongoing recorded intercourse between God and people, where the people are repeatedly exhorted to obey God in order to receive blessings or avoid punishment. “Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, so that it may go well with you” (Deuteronomy 6:18) is the recurrent theme.

The Christian (New Testament) story continues this same theme. Like the conditional covenants, the “Golden Rule” is essentially a deal: do to others as you want them to do to you. The Lord’s prayer reads “forgive us . . . as we forgive”. A marked change here is that reward and punishment are often projected into a future life. The judgement story in Matthew 25, in which at the end of time the good inherit the kingdom and the bad go to eternal punishment, is a typical example. The effect of these “deals” is to remove the focus from the interests of the other and replace it with self-interest as the standard by which to judge and determine actions toward others.

In both African Traditional Religion and the Judaic/Christian religions, exchange and reciprocity are a prominent norm in the practical living out of the faiths. This is not to say that the gift theme disappears after the creation accounts themselves. Old Testament wisdom literature includes the theme of absolute reciprocity side by side with the idea that there is no connection at all between our actions and our “reward” or “punishment.”¹⁴⁵ The portrayal of a God that is compassionate despite human wrong-doing is very much present in the Old Testament, as in the following passage from Hosea:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst,

¹⁴⁵See for example Ecclesiastes 8:12-14.

and I will not come in wrath.¹⁴⁶

This passage shows a break with exchange; it is a case where Israel does not reap what it sows. Hosea does not differ substantially from other prophets in maintaining that God will judge Israel, but that God also acts beyond the reciprocity of judgement to save Israel. One could say that the prophets repeatedly use the *threat* of reciprocity, but that God nevertheless works primarily through unilateral gift – as in creation, the “unconditional” covenants, and the prophetic predictions of eventual salvation despite Israel’s corruption. It is not that there is no gift, or that gift is insignificant, but only that it becomes heavily overlaid by the reciprocal theme.

Jesus, and many of Jesus’ teachings (such as those relating to forgiveness, doing good to those who do evil to you, etc.), can also be understood in the tradition of unilateral gift. The well known John 3:16 passage is one primarily of gift, breaking with exchange and reflecting the characteristics of unilateral action, focus on the need of the other, relationality, and life expansion:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

God’s preeminent concern to be in relationship is at times shown to override the demands of reciprocity. But in the New Testament like in the Old, this theme is overshadowed by exchange, especially in the repeated promise that “gifts” not returned in this life will be compensated in the next.

I have said little of the concepts and practices of sacrifice and offering, both of which are in most religions, including those being considered here, among the most prominent symbols of reciprocity. Sacrifice and offering are enmeshed in a complex web of giving and receiving. Offering is understood as “giving back to God,” while in sacrifice something small is given up in order to gain (or avoid) something big. What is given in sacrifice or offering is acknowledged as having come from

¹⁴⁶Hosea 11:8-9

God, so in that sense it is clearly a return. At the same time both practices are highly symbolic and often occasioned by the hope of receiving further “return” from God.

This preoccupation of religion with exchange represents a real discontinuity with the concept of original gift in creation. Through its creation stories religions acknowledge mystery and the unknowable, insisting that creation is an unaccountable gift to all, intended to further all of life through interrelationship. Why does this theme subsequently give way to exchange, in which a return must be calculated for every “gift”?

Some have suggested in response to this question that reciprocal relationships are necessary to the stability of society. Alvin Gouldner proposes that what he calls the “norm of reciprocity” serves both a stabilising function and a starting mechanism for social interaction. The processes of reciprocity “mobilize egoistic motivations and channel them into the maintenance of the social system.” The mutual obligations created by exchange promote social stability:

These outstanding obligations, no less than those already given compliance, contribute substantially to the stability of social systems. It is obviously inexpedient for creditors to break off relationships with those who have outstanding obligations to them. It may also be inexpedient for debtors to do so because their creditors may not again allow them to run up a bill of social indebtedness. In addition, it is *morally* improper, under the norm of reciprocity, to break off relations or to launch hostilities against those to whom you are still indebted.¹⁴⁷

As a “starting mechanism,” Gouldner suggests that the internalisation of the reciprocity norm creates a climate in which people are willing to risk initial steps in relationships, knowing that a response or repayment is socially obligated.

While this description of the role of reciprocal relations in society seems accurate, and would certainly fit many of the obligatory gift exchanges in traditional societies, from a gift perspective this

¹⁴⁷Alvin Gouldner, “The Norm of Reciprocity,” in Komter, 63.

view of reciprocity is negative and compromising. It fundamentally relies on self interest and debt in order to maintain social order.

It is understandable that religions, as they become established and institutionalised in a given society, would on the one hand promote an ideal – unilateral gift – as their point of departure, while at the same time embracing reciprocal or exchange relationships in daily life, because the latter provide social and religious cohesion. Still, this causes several serious problems. First, as noted it is negatively based and rests on the coercion of obligation. It quickly turns relationship into a kind of enslavement. Second, it gives priority to social stability over the commitment to expanded life. It is difficult to imagine how the expansive, outward looking “fullness of life” perspective is encouraged by a web of obligatory relations which include multiple boundaries. And third, the norm of reciprocity is founded on self interest. It maintains that we are willing to enter into relationship with another because we know that the shared norm of reciprocity assures us that if we give we will receive in turn. To the extent that a religion promotes an ethic that is other oriented, reliance on reciprocity appears to be a means that contradicts the end.

Genevieve Vaughan notes that the bonds caused by reciprocity are very different from the ties created through unilateral giving to need:

Giving and receiving, rather than the constraint of reciprocity, is what causes bonding. The interaction of nurturing and receiving nurture (or nurturers) is the mutually creative factor, not the imposition and following of the law, not the equivalence of exchange, nor the constraint of reciprocity.¹⁴⁸

It is useful to acknowledge that the paradigm of gift is ultimately one of weakness precisely because it is not concerned with return, and therefore refuses any means of coercion. Vaughan

¹⁴⁸Vaughan, *For-Giving*, 55.

shows how gift giving is coopted by and actually subsidises exchange for this reason.¹⁴⁹

In fact, exchange is parasitically embedded in a wider process of giftgiving, which actually gives to the process of exchange, allowing it to continue to prevail. Exchange itself becomes the ‘other’ of giftgiving.¹⁵⁰

The weakness of gift also comes from its “giving itself” to the other’s need. Just as God’s love was represented in creation as pouring itself out to empower the earth to bring forth a profusion of life, so gifts given to others’ needs necessarily move out of our control.

The net effect of the take over of religion by exchange is the humanisation of God. God is no longer the god whose word created, brought into being, the outward focussed god of love, but rather a god who wants a return, a god who makes deals. By making God into a god of exchange the mystery is removed; whatever is not immediately understood is nevertheless assumed to operate by exchange principles, which “in the end” will assure balance and “justice.” All that is left of God is power. In following a God who promises to even everything out – in this world or the next – we follow an idol of our own creation.

Owning gift

Through exchange the other/outward orientation of interrelated creation is thus largely displaced by an isolating self-interested attention to evenness or equality. This leads to the dilemma of ownership and possession. It is a dilemma because while religion claims creation to be a gift from God, at the same time it often maintains that creation still belongs to God and must be treated as God’s property. Magesa writes that on one hand

In African religious ethical understanding, the earth is given to humanity as a

¹⁴⁹One of Vaughan’s favourite illustrations of this phenomenon is how women’s free nurturing labour in the home subsidises the exchange based economy. See Vaughan, *For-Giving*, 59-62.

¹⁵⁰Vaughan, *For- Giving*, 51.

gratuitous gift and all human beings possess an equal claim to it and the resources it offers.¹⁵¹

But on the other hand, several paragraphs later he also states:

In African ethical thought, the universe has been lent by God to humanity..... to use on the condition that it must be kept in good order and used by all for the promotion of life, good relationships, and peace, at least within the clan or ethnic group.¹⁵²

This contradiction is equally present in the biblical tradition, where on one hand there are repeated statements to the effect that God has given creation to humanity. I have already noted Genesis 1:29 and following, where plant life is given to human beings for food. In Genesis 9 this is extended to all of life, if not all of creation:

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. (v. 3)

Throughout the Pentateuch in particular there are frequent statements to the effect that the land is given by God, unconditionally, as a possession. This begins with the promise to Abram, in Genesis 12:7: "To your offspring I will give this land."

On the other hand, the well known declaration of the psalmist in Psalms 24 represents a theme that runs concurrently throughout the Bible with the theme of creation as gift:

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers (v.1-2).

Note also Leviticus 25:23 which makes this point even more directly:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.

It appears then that there is a contradiction regarding original gift or creation. Does God in

¹⁵¹Magesa, 63.

¹⁵²Magesa, 63.

fact retain possession of creation, and if so is it really correct to understand it as gift? Returning to the Magesa quotes, above, note the statement that creation is a “gratuitous” gift. This word has no other meaning than that the gift is given without qualification, “without recompense,” “costing the recipient nothing,” “not involving a return benefit.”¹⁵³ To then suggest that “the universe has been *lent* by God to humanity” seems a clear contradiction; a loan is specifically something for which a return is required.

This dilemma mirrors what I have identified as the most debated issue concerning gift itself, namely how it relates to exchange, in the same way that it reflects the contrast between the original creation gift as an expanding, pro-life, boundary-breaking phenomenon, versus the stabilising, boundary-creating, exchange orientation of a social and moral order.

I do not intend to either dismiss or propose a simple resolution to this apparent contradiction, as I believe it represents an ongoing problem which institutional religions face. It has to do with God’s goodness, God’s will, God’s power, human will, and right and wrong. For this reason it is important to spend some time reflecting on this theme. What follows is not a neat mechanical solution, but rather some suggestions that might point to ways of better understanding original or creation gift.

To begin, this dilemma calls to mind Mauss’ perspective regarding the “spirit of the gift.” In his efforts to understand why gifts seem to require a return, Mauss suggested that a gift has a spirit or soul which links it to its “original” owner. When one makes a gift, one is inevitably giving not only the thing “itself” but also a part of oneself, one’s spirit. This idea as far as it goes is not necessarily objectionable; whether or not one is comfortable with the idea of “soul” or “spirit” it is clear that what

¹⁵³Webster’s Third New International Dictionary Volume I, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 992.

is happening when a gift is given cannot be completely comprehended by the “in itself” of whatever is given; there is an excess, and it is that excess which defines the difference between giving in general and giving gift. Mauss of course takes the further step of insisting that this spirit of the gift wants to return to its owner, as though by some kind of magnetic attraction. He suggests that it is self evident that if there is something of the giver in the gift, it can only come back, as though “keeping” were somehow the “natural” – or the only – metaphor available to us. By categorically understanding the spirit in terms of return, we are inevitably led to the paradigm of exchange and the cancellation or impossibility of gift, à la Derrida.

It is possible, on the other hand, to take Mauss’ idea of the spirit of the gift in a different direction by suggesting that the “spirit” concerns intention and purpose, or will, rather than ownership. That is to say that the excess in the gift is its intentionality. The issue of intention leads to Vaughan’s view of unilateral gift-giving focussed on the need of others. For Vaughan, gift is indeed gratuitous, but it is not superfluous or meaningless. Meaning is given to the gift by the intention, the motivation of the giver, which has in its turn been stimulated by the need of the receiver.

I would agree with Seneca and others¹⁵⁴ who say that gift can “happen” when something is given or when something is received, and that it is enough for gift to be given as a gift, or received as a gift, to be a gift. The fact of gift is not determined objectively as though it were a transaction. Nevertheless the question of intention remains. What are the implications if the intention of the gift is not fulfilled, or is disregarded? Can a gift be misappropriated? I believe this is the crux of the dilemma which resides in religion: how can the unilateral “original” gift of creation be maintained when it is used other than for God’s purpose of the expansion of life through interrelationship? What

¹⁵⁴See chapter 1.

happens when gift is withdrawn from the web of interrelatedness, and accumulated? As noted, the overwhelming tendency of religion is to maintain the foundation of gift but to in fact abandon the paradigm in favour of exchange.

Before dealing specifically with these questions I want to examine more closely the nature of ownership and possession in the context of religion.

Nkemnkia points out that the “world” – a concept that could perhaps be taken to include the Earth and all of inanimate creation – has a special place in the created order, in that it is from the earth that God brings forth life, and it is the earth that sustains life.

Even though the world is not generated but created . . . it generates life at the Will of the Creator. Thus, the world exists for the life that it generates, especially for man’s presence.¹⁵⁵

Dibeela elaborates this special relationship between the earth and life, stating that according to a creation story of the Batswana

everything emerged out of the earth. It is said that there was a crack on the surface of the earth and out of it came out people, animals, and their property. . . the narrative seems to suggest that all people were created equal, and with an equal entitlement to the prosperity of the earth. . . Also strongly expressed in the narrative is the way creation is connected and interdependent. The fact that we came out of the earth is a connection, perhaps, that can only be likened to that of a child coming out of its mother’s womb. Similarly, Genesis also holds that people were made from dust. *Such a bond cannot be broken.*¹⁵⁶

A similar suggestion of the special place of the “Earth” is revealed in Genesis 1:

Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation. . .”(v. 11)

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind. . .”(v. 24)

I noted above the apparent contradiction between the religious view that creation is given as

¹⁵⁵Nkemnkia, 127.

¹⁵⁶Moiserale Dibeela, “A Setswana Perspective on Genesis 1:1-10,” *The Bible in Africa*, eds. Gerald West and Musa Dube (Lieden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001) 387 (emphasis added).

a gift, and that it belongs to God. I believe this can be understood with the help of African Religion's view of land, and with a more profound appreciation of the nature of gift. While it is true that the original gift of creation happens "in the beginning," in fact it is not really an historical occurrence but an ongoing event – and thus an ongoing gift. As a result, creation is not given once and for all to an "original" people, it is given continually – in the past, present and future – to all people. When religion asserts that creation (land, the Earth) belongs to God, this is simply a way of saying that it does not belong finally to any one people in the past or the present; it cannot be alienated from future generations as well. Kamalu says that the living are custodians of the land:

The living have a moral responsibility to maintain the Earth for unborn generations to come. . . In Africa many peoples see a transcendental oneness of the Earth with the human community. The human community are seen as having an organic and symbiotic relationship with the land, so much so that in various African languages the same word is used to refer to both land and people/family/community.¹⁵⁷

In the biblical account of God's dealings with Abram, it is interesting to note in this regard that even though the land promised to Abram is ultimately alienated in a violent way from the Canaanite population, there is a limited sense in which the same theme of land as a perpetual gift as noted above is repeated here. The land is promised to Abram's offspring, as "a perpetual holding." Our modernist and individualist view understands that "perpetual" more readily in terms of alienation and ownership, rather than seeing it as an emphasis on the fact that the land was to be forever available to future generations. Thus this can be read in contrasting ways – a promise that the land would be available, even "as a possession," but also a promise that the land should not or could not be alienated from future generations. The latter is of course exactly what the Jubilee laws attempted to ensure.

¹⁵⁷Kamalu, 157.

Magesa summarises the point by asserting that according to African religious thought, certain resources cannot be privately owned:

They are seen as a gift of God to all human beings, without distinction or discrimination. Land, for example, which most Africans regard as an absolute source of sustenance, may only be held in trust for the present and the future.¹⁵⁸

But ultimately it is not an issue of whether land is privately owned or communally owned. It is the idea of ownership per se that does not fit the gifts of creation.¹⁵⁹ These gifts are given for use, to sustain life and to build interrelationships among people and among all different parts of creation. As soon as the gifts are owned – whether individually or communally – they are withdrawn from circulation, and are no longer available for their purpose of furthering life and building relationships among all of creation.

This leads me to suggest that in a general way, it is a further characteristic of gift as discussed in this paper that it is not owned – not owned “in the first place” by the giver who gives it, and not given for possession/ownership to the receiver. This perspective is counter-intuitive – in place of the axiom “you can’t give what you don’t have,” something approaching the inverse is proposed: one can only give as *gift* – in the sense I am giving to the term here – that which one does not possess. This is based first of all on the understanding that everything that is, everything that exists, has been given at creation. There is no original gift except in creation. As the Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 4:7, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?” The same perspective is reflected by the thirteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart:

¹⁵⁸Magesa, 244.

¹⁵⁹See Magesa, 244-245.

There is no such thing as “my” bread. All bread is ours and is given to me, to others through me, and to me through others. For not only bread but all things necessary for sustenance in this life are given on loan to us with others, and because of others and for others and to others through us.¹⁶⁰

I have been using language that implies or suggests a creator, but a creator is not necessary to the point. Regardless of how all things, all matter, has come into being, it is unavoidably received by human beings as gift – that is to say, not through exchange.¹⁶¹ When we recognise our “non ownership” of the resources around us, we are then able to pass them on as gifts in the sense I am using it here. If to the contrary we see these resources as ours, they have become commodities, and it is difficult for them to be given as gifts. Ultimately the only way that anything can become a possession is for a gift to be transformed into a commodity.

I am not suggesting that ownership or possession is wrong, only that when we possess something we are removing a gift from circulation. In various societies there are many different legal means by which ownership is recognised. But all of these means involve the expropriation of what was at some point in its genealogy a gift.

This view of gift in several religious traditions may project too sharply a juxtaposition between gift and exchange. In fact as I have already stated I do not intend to portray these two distinct modes of giving and receiving as polar opposites. *Exchange* and what I have called *gift* resemble each other in that in both there is a connection between giver and receiver, but these connections are not identical, and certainly there is no reason to understand both of them in terms of

¹⁶⁰Quoted in Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1983) 265.

¹⁶¹This is Jean-Luc Marion’s point: “What *shows itself* first *gives itself* – this is my one and only theme.” Marion, 5. The absence of a “giver” does raise questions about how the intention of creation can be understood, but it does not affect the fact that the “receiver” receives – as gift – that which is given regardless of the giver.

exchange (return). When something is given in a manner that imitates original gift, it is given to enhance and further the life of the receiver. In the process it creates a bond or tie – a relationship – between giver and receiver, but this is a bond of participation rather than a bond of obligation. The suggestion that being bonded or related is of necessity onerous, entailing obligation, simply indicates the extent to which we are captive to the paradigm of ownership and exchange, and have lost touch with the spirit of original gift and givenness.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the religious traditions considered here to the subject of gift is the way in which creation is combined with a proactive emphasis on abundant living and interrelationship. While religions are permeated with exchange concepts, the widespread religious premise that creation is a unilateral gift given to all for use, for the expansion of life rather than for possession and alienation, provides a comprehensive basis for understanding unilateral giftgiving.

Chapter 5: Living Gift

The purely speculative and typically scholastic question of whether generosity and disinterestedness are possible should give way to the political question of the means that have to be implemented in order to create universes in which, as in gift economies, people have an interest in disinterestedness and generosity, or, rather, are durably disposed to respect these universally respected forms of respect for the universal. (Pierre Bourdieu)

In this concluding chapter I will review some of what has been said in this essay about owning, giving and sharing gifts, about how gifts move, and what difference it makes to think about gifts. I will also consider further several themes that have only been briefly alluded to in earlier chapters.

This essay has tried to make the case that there is a kind of giving that occurs as a response to the need of the other, and that is not simply a prelude to receiving. I have used the term *gift* for this kind of giving, but I have tried not to do so in any exclusive way. To pretend to define gift “once and for all,” “definitively,” is a pointless exercise; it is also contradictory to the nature of gift, which, as I have noted, does not lend itself to boundaries, limits, and definitions. My description of gift has therefore been deliberately modest. Rather than saying “this is what gift really is” I have tried to describe the particular gift with which I am concerned.

In making the case for an other-oriented, non-reciprocal gift I first attempted to better understand how gift can be distinguished and extracted from the dominant paradigm of exchange. In the first chapter I outlined various characteristics of this gift – *givenness*, the *voluntary* and *uncompensated* nature of gift, *benevolent intention*, and *focus on the other*. This was followed by a chapter which considered the origins and defining characteristics of the exchange paradigm. It was noted that exchange involves *self focus*, *comparison and measurement*, *negative bonding*,

classification, and *scarcity*. Exchange is a paradigm of power in contrast to the vulnerability of gift.

The third chapter reviewed five writers on gift and exchange, giving particular attention to how each one understood gift and return or reciprocity. In chapter four I considered how African Traditional Religion and the Judaic/Christian religions treat gifts. I suggested that religion in a sense rests on the gift paradigm through its understandings of creation, but that religion subsequently orients itself thoroughly to exchange by casting ethics in reciprocal terms.

I have made the case that to put forward a concise concluding understanding of gift would contradict what I have said about the elusive nature of gifts. Even efforts to describe and simply comment on gifts – what they are, how they function – are fraught with ambiguity, in part because it is difficult to distinguish between literalism and metaphor. Is it appropriate to speak of the material gift or “present” interchangeably with talents or skills, let alone even more immaterial gifts that exist primarily in the minds and hearts of those involved? Are these of the same genre? What similarity is there between the gift of “the thing given” and the gift of “the intention”? The gift we “have” and the gift we “give”? While I have stressed the need to avoid saying “this is gift” and “this is not gift,” ultimately the broad use of the word in ways that are contradictory or irrelevant to our particular theme *is* problematic. What is it, finally, that needs to be clarified or stated about gift? What particular contribution to the “field,” and more importantly, to the ways people can think about giving – others, needs, helping, ethical acts – can be valuable and significant?

Such questions lead easily to a sense that “this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.” In any event it seems appropriate to be both modest and tentative regarding what is said descriptively and prescriptively about *gift*. Ultimately the question that underlies the discussions in this essay is this: How do (or should) people understand the relationship among *themselves*, the variety of *resources*

that surround and are in some sense available to them, and *others*? And what kinds of actions should follow this understanding?

Below are some brief attempts to further explore some of the spaces that these questions – or *gift* – occupy.

Self interest and the Other-focus

I have asserted that one of the most significant distinctions between gift and exchange is their respective orientations toward the needs of the other and the need of the self. In exchange, the element of return draws the attention of each party to what they receive or “get out of” the transaction, while in gift the focus is drawn away from the transaction itself by the need of the other. This raises further questions and implications.

- Does it have to be this way? Is it not possible that in an exchange, the parties could be looking after each others’ interests rather than their own? Of course, it is possible, and no doubt it in fact occurs. The point is that the structure of exchange discourages other-interest by placing a premium on the equality or “fairness” of the exchange. In a situation where two interests interact, I am likely to be most responsive to the interest I know best, and in general that is my interest.
- The concern of religion – its ethical/moral concern – has to do *au fond* with encouraging, helping, and convincing people to “do the right thing.” In all religions, doing the right thing assumes “being good toward others.” This is to say that in religion, other-interest is a given. It is thus ironic that to a considerable degree, the ethics of religion differ little from civil law in inevitably resorting to *self interest* to promote and legitimate *other interest*. This disassociation of means and ends leaves religions’ moral/ethical concern compromised.

- Defining self interest and other interest is itself a problematic task. Christopher Jencks outlines a useful approach to this question, using the terms *selfish* and *unselfish*. He proposes that selfishness involves any of the following:
 - a subjective definition of one's welfare that does not include the welfare of others
 - actual behaviour which indicates that one is not concerned with the welfare of others
 - a concern with the welfare of others that is merely a means of promoting one's own longer term selfish ends.

Unselfishness on the other hand is defined as when one feels and acts as if the long-term welfare of others is important, independent of its effects on one's own welfare. Jencks notes further that unselfishness (other interest, altruism) always involves a redefining of the self to in one way or another include "outside" elements or perspectives. It can be argued – perhaps cynically – that with this expanded view of the self, the self is made more comprehensive, and all acts are selfish. But this leaves unexplained the difference between actual behaviour which takes account of the welfare of others and actual behaviour which does not.¹⁶²

One of the problems in dealing with self interest is that it too is a concept very much influenced by an exchange view of ownership. In other words, self interest vis-a-vis the other involves the extraction and appropriation of something hitherto outside of our self or our interest. But there are also many possibilities for the self to be *interested* externally in a non-owning, non-possessing, non-acquisitive way. Specifically, one may want to become part of something "other"; to participate, to give one's "self" to a different arena (or person, group, reality). This is what I refer to when I speak of the gift as being *other-interested*. Giving in response to the need of the other can be a way of saying "I want to be a part of – to be identified with, to participate in – that other.

¹⁶²Jencks, in Komter, 177-178.

Sharing, and the Ambiguity of Ownership

The word *share* is often used interchangeably with the word *give*. This obscures the fact that *share* has a distinct meaning that can contribute to our understanding of how gifts function.¹⁶³ Because sharing is an action or state that necessarily involves another person or group, it is sharing that describes the relational aspect of gifts and how they are used. Magesa emphasises the critical role of sharing in building relationships and “community”:

The refusal to share is wrong. It is, in fact, an act of destruction because it does not serve to cement the bonding that is required to form community. Quite the contrary, it is perceived as an element that seeks to weaken and break such bonds.¹⁶⁴

When gifts are shared (rather than simply “given”) the world of the giver and the world of the receiver are made to overlap. This suggests that sharing is an other oriented activity. In sharing, all of the parties become mixed up and are a part of, or belong to, what is being done. Issues of ownership become less clear.

Adriaan Peperzak pursues the themes of ownership and sharing, noting that sharing involves giving those things that are not necessarily detachable from the giver:

In giving you my attention, I cannot separate my attention from me; in singing for you, I share my performance, my skills, my time with you. . . If I “give” you my work, consolation, pleasure, or company, I share my presence or certain properties, talents, and actions with you. . . Must all “mineness” be destroyed by [the gift’s] transformation into your property?¹⁶⁵

Peperzak seems uncomfortable with the ambiguity regarding ownership resulting from sharing,

¹⁶³Share in fact has two nearly opposite or contradictory meanings. First, it implies a division or separation; a property, a company, a sum of money, even food is divided into shares, equal parts separated and distributed to different persons. In contrast, sharing also means to partake of, use, experience, occupy, or enjoy with others, to have in common. Synonyms of share are participate, or partake. Obviously it is in this second sense that I am interested in the term share or sharing.

¹⁶⁴Magesa, 66.

¹⁶⁵Peperzak, in Wyschogrod, 166-167.

suggesting that the gift must be something the giver possesses, and that “only a transfer that completely transforms something that is mine into ‘yours’ seems to fully deserve the name of giving.”¹⁶⁶

This comes very close to the core of what the present essay has to say about gifts. On the surface, Peperzak’s discomfort is understandable; what sense does it make to talk about *giving* what one does not *have*? But *gift*, or at least the form of gift that I have been concerned with exploring here, can best occur precisely when we realise that we do not own it.

Earlier in this writing I explored the idea of *original gift*. There I noted the claims of religions that everything is originally gift, originally given.¹⁶⁷ On that basis I further suggested that ownership results from the conversion of gifts into commodities. Commodities are things that can be exchanged in a market context. In fact ownership could be defined in large part as the right to exchange. While ownership is essentially a legal concept, having to do with rights and standing, it is self-evident that there is no ultimate legal basis for ownership in light of the original givenness of everything. Ownership is an artificial concept with no recourse to any “natural law.” There are no “natural” patterns or structures, entities, that can conceivably legitimate this “right,” short of reliance on the particular claims of religious groups that their God has “given” specific things – generally land – specifically to them.¹⁶⁸

If gift as defined here operates outside of exchange, particularly in that it has no return, then that which is a commodity cannot be a gift. Commodities must be converted – or more accurately, “reconverted” – into gifts before they can be given as gifts. This reversion happens when one

¹⁶⁶Peperzak, in Wyschogrod, 166-167.

¹⁶⁷See chapter 4. Again, I also note Jean-Luc Marion’s convincing argument that this original givenness is not dependent on a transcendent cause or agent.

¹⁶⁸For example, God’s giving of the land to Abraham and his descendants as noted in Genesis 13:14-17. Such understandings that God has given land to a particular people contradict the more foundational claim of many creation accounts that land is given to all, or to life itself, and are in any case faith based claims.

recognises or acknowledges that in fact one does not “own” what one “has.” By this logic, I suggest it is when we realise that we do not really own something, that it can be a gift to someone else. Not owning means recognising that the thing is still in circulation, that it is outside of the world of exchange, and that it needs to move on. A gift in this view is something that is *not-mine* that becomes *not-yours*.

The sharing of material gifts can be especially difficult because they are so mobile, so easily possessed, so readily alienable from the giver or from the receiver, from the relationship, and so easily taken out of circulation. Since relationship is the intention of the gift – in that the gift is an expression of the desire to be somehow connected to the need of the other – it is understandable that those things which are less “detachable,” such as talents, skills, abilities, are exactly those which most readily serve as gifts. Of course, material objects can take on relational value because of their history, their provenance, who used them, or the relationships they represent, rather than because of their cost or market value.¹⁶⁹

In passing on gifts we are affirming that they are not ours. The gift rests not with the giver or with the receiver; but in the space between that links the two.

Creativity of need, receiver

I have already noted Genevieve Vaughan’s view that receiving is creative rather than passive,¹⁷⁰ and that gifts move to the need of the other. I want to return to this because it is an essential aspect in understanding that gift is not a balanced reciprocity, a return, but a continuous

¹⁶⁹Of all possible material gifts, money is the most mobile, the most detachable, and therefore the least “relational.” This is because money is always a substitute; it represents value rather than having any value itself. As a substitute for some material thing or things, for some service or potential service, it is disconnected and mercurial. Because money is so versatile, both givers and receivers often are made to feel uncomfortable with restrictions and designations placed on its use.

¹⁷⁰Page 65, above.

movement. Here the “other’s need” is identical to the “receiver.” In the light of an understanding of original and universal givenness, givers and receivers are not polar opposites, but rather are essentially the same, connected by the flow of gifts; each in turn receiving, “using” and transforming, and giving. “The use of what has been given to us is necessary to make what has been given into a gift. If we do not use it, it is wasted, lifeless.”¹⁷¹

When a gift is received (by a need) it has an intrinsic value that the receiver can recognise, but using the gift involves the receiver attributing additional value to it. Returning to the metaphor of the relationship between the sun and the earth, Vaughan proposes that while the sun is often seen as the ultimate giver, it is the earth that continually creates needs that can use the sun’s gifts.

The need is essential to the gift, for without it the gift is nothing. Thus, the earth has created myriad needs, which the sun can satisfy with her light – light which otherwise would be unused and barren. The interaction of these needs with each other recreates the giving-and-receiving interactions of the sun and earth. The asymmetry is the key.¹⁷²

Needs and gifts, like givers and receivers, are ultimately the same thing, and can perhaps best be understood through the metaphor of life itself, in which all species move through different stages of transformation and develop as they relate to different aspects of their environments, or to changing environments.

On Gratitude

In this essay I have made only several minor references to *gratitude*. Because gratitude is commonly closely associated with gift, it calls for further comment.

Gratitude is defined as a feeling of appreciation for benefits or gifts received. But the definition

¹⁷¹Vaughan, 47.

¹⁷²Vaughan, 401.

goes beyond such a feeling to imply an actual repayment or return of a gift received; for example in common language there is little difference between saying “how can I express my gratitude?” and “how can I repay you?” Or it is said “please accept this as an expression of our gratitude”, or “we are left with a debt of gratitude.” So gratitude seems indeed to be very closely connected to exchange; the *expression* of gratitude appears as a synonym of repayment, and it is little wonder that Derrida and others are quick to associate gratitude with a return gift. French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas speaks of a life of service to others (gift) in terms of a movement toward the other that never returns, and that “consequently requires an *ingratitude* of the Other. Gratitude would be the return of the movement to its origin.”¹⁷³ For many *gratitude* and the *expression of gratitude* have been conflated into a single meaning which does not in fact differ much from *repayment*.

But this reduction seems a questionable over-simplification, on at least two counts. First, Adriaan Peperzak suggests that Levinas is engaging in “rhetorical exaggeration” which emphasises the “radical independence that separates an authentic gift from the thanks it might yield.” Peperzak points out that gratitude in fact comes too late to affect the “gesture of giving” itself. In an obvious reference to Derrida and others, Peperzak further suggests that the “numerous repetitions of this exaggeration have robbed it of its rhetorical charm and impact” without adding anything to the argument itself.¹⁷⁴

Second, the idea of gratitude is much richer than its proverbial reduction. At its root is the idea of “pleasing,” “affording pleasure or contentment.” Gratitude is a pleasant feeling engendered by something one has received. In a sense it is the awareness that our gifts do not come from ourselves,

¹⁷³Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 49.

¹⁷⁴Peperzak in Wyschogrod, 162-163. The writer’s conclusion that “For a phenomenology of giving, it is not necessary to establish that its purest form is an empirical fact; it is sufficient and necessary that we can imagine and think its pure form as a realizable possibility, even if the human condition shows us only contaminated or mixed realizations. A comparison between more or less generous givers, for instance, presupposes an idea of authentic giving” seems valid.

which is also to say that it is an awareness of our relatedness to others. I have already noted above (page 71) Vaughan's suggestion that gratitude is equivalent to knowledge or awareness; that the feeling of gratitude comes at the point when one recognises the value or significance of what one has received – i.e. when the gift becomes knowledge. While this “pleasant feeling” may indeed reflect back to the giver, its “radiance” is not limited to or focussed on that direction.

Lewis Hyde takes this idea further in his chapter titled *The Labour of Gratitude*.¹⁷⁵ For Hyde, gratitude has to do with the transformation effected by the gift in the receiver. Quoting Meister Eckhart, Hyde notes that “the fruitfulness of a gift is the only gratitude for the gift.” Gratitude and the creative use of the gift are one and the same:

I would like to speak of gratitude as a labor undertaken by the soul to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. Between the time a gift comes to us and the time we pass it along, we suffer gratitude.¹⁷⁶

While Hyde's language is frequently that of exchange, it is clear that in fact he understands the gift as moving on rather than moving back or returning. Gratitude itself is the creative awareness that recognises what has been given and incorporates it in a transformative way. Out of this “gratitude” a further gift is given (or the gift is given further), and the receiver becomes a giver. In this way we can understand Hyde's insistence that “the end of the labor of gratitude is similarity with the gift or its donor.”¹⁷⁷ The similarity is that the gift is (re-)given; the receiver becomes a giver.

Thinking Gift in an Exchange World

I conclude this essay by simply reaffirming two critical observations of this writing.

¹⁷⁵Hyde, 40-55.

¹⁷⁶Hyde, 47.

¹⁷⁷Hyde, 50.

First, unilateral giftgiving as I have characterised it can and does happen. There is nothing about such giving – its voluntary nature, its independence from return or reciprocation, its other focus – that makes it theoretically impossible or practically inaccessible. In fact there are different examples of such gift in everyday life. These include both “natural” patterns and the individual incidents of those patterns – such as the nurture given to children by parents – on the one hand, and the exceptional supererogatory acts – such as various impulsive or instinctive responses in which the giver is moved by awareness of the other’s need – on the other.

Because gift occurs in a context where giving and receiving per se are dominated by the exchange paradigm, it is often difficult to recognise gift, and it is also difficult to practice it. Exchange above all else means that giving is one side of an equation. This has many implications for how we understand and recognise gift, as well as for how easily gift can happen. Gift is a foreigner in the exchange culture because it is such an obvious contradiction to the gospel of polarity, balance and return. Gift is a free lunch in a global culture that firmly believes there is no free lunch.

Giftgiving is threatened because from the dominant exchange perspective, the consequences, the further movements of gifts after they are given, resemble the return of exchange. There is great risk of becoming addicted to and focussing on this further movement, naming it return where no return exists. Attention to return can easily transform giftgiving into exchange. This is perhaps the source of the near-impossibility of gift. If gift involves surprise, the excessive, that which erases our boundaries (structures, laws), is it really possible to be a gift-giver, or can one only occasionally give gifts?

Second, just as gift does not really belong on the continuum of exchange, neither does it belong on the continuum of “interestedness.” In this paper I have asserted that gift is characterised by *other-interest*, but perhaps this is an unfortunate term, raising as it does interminable reflection of the

nature of interest – i.e. whether there is any action which is not self-interested, whether other-interest is really enlightened or expanded self-interest, etc. To speak of *other-interest* already suggests a calculation that is not appropriate to gift. It suggests that the need of the other is something that can be analysed, something that one can target with solutions.

The other-orientation of the gift is rather a response to being *moved* by the other's situation or need. It is an expression of the desire to fill a need of the other, but also of desire for the other, to be connected to the other, to be included in the other's world or situation. It is not something that asks the question of *interest*; it is not on the interest continuum. Interest issues of "how it will all turn out" – either for the giver or the receiver – are not at the core of what is happening when a gift is given in response to the other's need.

Still, most giving – and receiving – is neither pure, other-interested gift, nor pure, self-interested exchange. Unilateral giftgiving is generally compromised by an attention to return, and thus a consideration of the interest of the giver. What should also be acknowledged is that exchange is also "contaminated" by other interest and desire for real relationship. It is unhelpful to assume that everything that is not "pure" gift is exchange, while everything that is not "pure" exchange is also exchange. The quotation from Pierre Bourdieu at the beginning of this chapter is to the point: the question of the possibility of gift needs to be overtaken by the question of how "disinterestedness and generosity" can be nurtured and taught.

This is indeed a *political* question as Bourdieu points out. As such it should be asked in the context of individual/family/community life settings, and in the context of religious or other systems which ostensibly shape thinking about morality, right and wrong. An attentive awareness of the pervasiveness of reciprocal thinking and acting can itself create more space for the possibility of gift.

As human beings we should always call into question our nearly instinctive reference to the return of any “good” act we might contemplate.

The theme with which religion generally begins – the original gift of all creation, unilaterally given for the purpose of abundant, interrelated life – is one it should follow to the end. A belief system which reduces right or good to one side of an equation, a deal, that suggests people should act in a certain way because of the rewards they will receive, is unworthy of our allegiance, and can contribute little to making the world a more generous, sharing place.

Peperzak suggests that it is not necessary to establish “pure gift” as a concrete fact; it is enough that we can imagine such a pure form, “even if the human condition shows us only contaminated or mixed realisations. A comparison between more or less generous givers, for instance, presupposes an idea of authentic giving.”¹⁷⁸ This vision of authentic gift opens up the everyday possibility of greater generosity, greater attention to others’ needs, and greater relatedness to life in all its abundance.

¹⁷⁸Peperzak in Wyschogrod, 163.

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