

On the moral grounds of economic relations: A Maussian approach

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Abstract

The gift is not a uniform economic category, since gifts are structured by different economic principles or moral rules which co-exist in all societies. Mauss showed that dominant economic forms, like capitalist markets or the heroic gift, often elevate one principle above the others, but ordinary people must combine them in order to get by. There are three moral grounds for economic relations: communism, exchange and hierarchy. Everyday communism is basic to living in society. It is presumptively eternal, a permanent sense of being mutually indebted. Exchange or reciprocity strives to achieve equivalence, so that indebtedness is temporary and should ideally be cancelled. Hierarchy is a permanent relationship between unequal parties. The rhetoric of reciprocity disguises the working principle, which is precedent. Debt here is irrevocable and transfers pass only one way. Ethnography allows us to conceive of making new societies where the balance of economic principles is different from our own.

Keywords

Capitalism, communism, debt, ethnography, gift, hierarchy, morality, reciprocity

The gift and the fundamental categories of economic transaction

For all the vast literature on the gift, the concept is surprisingly under-theorized. This is because everyone assumes that there is something called ‘the gift’, that all transactions not involving payment or the promise of payment are the same thing. Whether ‘gifts’ are seen as a matter of generosity, a lack of calculation, creating social relations or a refusal to distinguish between generosity and self-interest, the possibility that they operate according to different transactional logics is often overlooked.

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In challenging the assumption of the gift's conceptual unity, I follow Marcel Mauss, whose great contribution to social theory was to recognize not only the diversity of economic transactions across human societies, but also that all important economic and moral possibilities are present in *any* human society. Even if we like to contrast 'gift economies' with 'market economies', as if each represents a total conceptual universe, Mauss did not see things this way. True, he did write, for instance, at the end of his 'essay on the gift':

The word 'interest' can be traced back to the Latin *interest* written on account books opposite rents to be recovered. ... The victory of rationalism and mercantilism was required before the notions of profit and the individual were given currency and raised to the level of principles. ... It is only our Western societies that quite recently turned man into an economic animal.

(1990 [1925]: 73–74)

When making such statements, Mauss was referring to how, in a given social order, people seize on certain practices and use them to generalize about human nature. Our conception of man as an 'economic animal' is made possible by certain specific technologies (money, ledger sheets, mathematical calculations of interest) which we then generalize to reveal the hidden truth behind everything – but the existence of such technologies proves nothing. Mauss is really saying that such calculation is nothing new.

In fact, Mauss often goes much further. In his lectures on ethnography, he insisted that money, in the broadest sense of the term, existed in virtually *all* known human societies (2009 [1947]: 103, 107) – and that markets appeared in most (with some exceptions such as the Celtic world). He said the same was also true of communism (2009 [1947]: 102, 104–105). In his 'essay on the gift', there is a profound tension. On the one hand, he allows that even institutions like the calculation of interest payments do not just go back to the Romans or even Mesopotamians, but can exist in 'archaic' societies like the Kwakiutl – societies that did not even practise agriculture. Yet, on the other, he makes an evolutionary argument that societies have moved from 'total *prestations*' to the aristocratic 'potlatch' to modern commercial markets. In the essay, when he speaks of stages – except for the most primitive peoples – he's talking about *dominant* institutions. We might think of ourselves abstractly as 'calculating machines', but most of us only act that way in specific situations. Ordinarily, 'pure irrational expenditure' is the rule among both the rich and poor, and it would be hard to argue that means–end utilitarianism is really the rule even for the middle classes (Mauss, 1990 [1925]: 74).

This notion was taken up by Georges Bataille (1991–1993 [1946–1949]), and we are used to reading Mauss retrospectively through his work. Bataille's elaboration of the idea of expenditure was based largely on consumption as freedom (and consumption as ritualized destruction), which is more about unveiling the hidden logic of capitalism, with its rationalized productive and expressive consumptive spheres, than a great truth about humanity. Mauss was making a more subtle argument, not unlike Antonio Gramsci's around the same time. True, the bourgeoisie projects certain aspects of its own reality as a theory of human nature and society – life is a marketplace, we are all isolated individuals entering contractual relations – but this view is never stable, since it is constantly

contradicted by everyone's daily experience, even for the bourgeoisie. Socialist ideas once made intuitive sense, because we have all had the experience of communism.

The *Manual of Ethnography* (2009 [1947]) makes it clear that Mauss felt this was always the case. In any relatively large and complex system of human relations – as he puts it, ‘almost everywhere’ – *all* major social possibilities are already present, simultaneously – at least in embryonic form. There will always be individualism and communism too; something like money and the calculation it makes possible, but also every sort of gift. The question, then, is which dominant institutions shape our basic perceptions of humanity. Thus aristocratic societies, like the Kwakiutl or the ancient Celts, are dominated by the heroic gift, with endless games of munificence, liberality and one-upmanship. Such games were limited to the elite, while ordinary people went about their daily affairs differently. But they represented a certain ideal, even a cosmological function: they became models of what human beings are basically about, their aims and aspirations, the means and stakes of human existence. The market plays the same role in capitalism. Mauss notes that such aristocratic values maintained their dominance in the ancient world, despite the development of commerce. But, just as the latter made it possible to imagine human life in very different terms, so does the continued existence of communism and gift relations today allow us to reconfigure what human life is all about. It would take a political revolution, which was Mauss's aim: as a revolutionary cooperativist, he wanted to encourage the development of new institutions based on these alternative economic practices to the point where they could displace capitalism (see Fournier, 2006; Graeber, 2001).

Mauss's core insight was extraordinarily important. The idea of society as an often confused amalgam of often contradictory principles, each implying different conceptions of the meaning of life, not only provides a useful corrective to the totalizing tendencies of Marxism and structuralism, but it is also essential for imagining a way out of capitalism – as has been recognized by feminist thinkers like J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) and Italian post-workerists like Massimo De Angelis (2007). We need to maintain this insight without falling into anachronism – as Mauss undeniably sometimes did. I wish to propose three fundamentally different moral logics lying behind phenomena that we class together as ‘the gift’. These exist everywhere in different forms and articulations, so that in any given situation there are several kinds of moral reasoning actors *could* apply. Unlike Lévi-Strauss (1950), I claim that only one of these is based on the principle of reciprocity. I will call these logics communism, exchange and hierarchy.

Communism

I define communism as any human relationship that operates on the principle of ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’. I could have used a more neutral term like ‘solidarity’, ‘mutual aid’, ‘conviviality’ or even ‘help’ instead (Graeber, 2010).

Prompted by Mauss, I suggest that we jettison the old-fashioned assumption that ‘communism’ is basically about property relations, reflecting a time long ago when all things were held in common and the messianic possibility of restoring the community of property – what might be called ‘mythic communism’ – but instead see it simply as a

principle immanent in everyday life. Whenever action proceeds ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’ – even if it is between two people – we are in the presence of ‘everyday communism’. Almost everyone behaves this way when collaborating on a common project. If someone fixing a broken water pipe says ‘Hand me the wrench’, their co-worker will not usually say ‘And what do I get for it?’, even if they are working for Exxon-Mobil, Burger King or Royal Bank of Scotland. The reason is efficiency (ironic, given the conventional wisdom that ‘communism just doesn’t work’): if you want to get something done, allocating tasks by ability, and giving people what they need to do the job, is the most effective way to go about it. It’s one of the scandals of capitalism that most firms, internally, operate in a communistic way. True, they don’t operate democratically. Most often they are organized by military-style chains of command. But top-down chains of command are not very efficient (they tend to promote stupidity among those on top, resentment among those on the bottom). When cooperation depends on improvisation, the more democratic it tends to become. Inventors have always known this, start-up capitalists also, and computer engineers have recently rediscovered the principle: not only with freeware, but even in the organization of their businesses.

This is why in the immediate wake of great disasters – a flood, a blackout, a revolution or economic collapse – people tend to behave the same way, reverting to a kind of rough-and-ready communism. Hierarchies, markets and the like become luxuries that no one can really afford. Anyone who has lived through such a moment can speak to the way strangers become sisters and brothers, and human society itself seems to be reborn. We are not just talking about cooperation. *Communism is the foundation of all human sociability*. It makes society possible. Anyone who is not an enemy can be expected to respect the principle of ‘from each according to their abilities ...’ at least to some extent: for example, if you need to figure out how to get somewhere, and they can give you directions, they will. We take this so much for granted that the exceptions are themselves revealing. Evans-Pritchard reports his discomfiture when someone gave him intentionally wrong directions:

On one occasion I asked the way to a certain place and was deliberately deceived. I returned in chagrin to camp and asked the people why they had told me the wrong way. One of them replied, ‘You are a foreigner, why should we tell you the right way? Even if a Nuer who was a stranger asked us the way we would say to him, “You continue straight along that path”, but we would not tell him that the path forked. Why should we tell him? But you are now a member of our camp and you are kind to our children, so we will tell you the right way in future.’

(Evans-Pritchard, 1940: 182)

The Nuer are constantly engaged in feuds: any stranger might be an enemy scouting out a good place for an ambush; it would be unwise to give him useful information. Evans-Pritchard’s own situation was obviously relevant. The inhabitants of the first place he settled in followed a prophet recently killed when the British government sent the RAF to strafe and bomb their camps. Their treatment of him seems quite generous in the circumstances.

Conversation is particularly suited to communism. Lies, insults, put-downs and other sorts of verbal aggression are important, but these are somewhat exceptional. It is surely significant that, when we wish to break off amicable relations with someone, we stop speaking to them entirely. The same goes for small courtesies like asking for a light, or even a cigarette, or opening doors for strangers. It seems more legitimate to ask a stranger for a cigarette than for an equivalent amount in cash; in fact, it's difficult to refuse a fellow-smoker such a request. The costs of compliance are considered minimal. The same is true if another person's need – even a stranger's – is spectacular and extreme: if they are drowning, for example. If a child has fallen onto the tracks, we assume that anyone who can help them up will do so.

I call this 'baseline communism': apart from with enemies, when the need is great enough or the cost reasonable enough, the principle will be applied. Of course, communities have different standards for what is reasonable. In large impersonal communities, it may go no further than asking for a light or directions. This might not be much, but it contains the possibility of larger social relations. In smaller, less impersonal communities – particularly, when not divided into social classes – the same logic usually extends much further: for example, it is often difficult to refuse a request not just for tobacco, but for food – sometimes, even from a stranger; certainly, from anyone considered to belong to the same community. Evans-Pritchard also notes that these same Nuer find it impossible, when dealing with someone they have accepted as a member of their camp, to refuse a request for an item of common consumption, so that anyone known to have extra in the way of grain, tobacco or, for that matter, agricultural implements will see their stockpiles disappear almost immediately (1940: 183). But this baseline of open-handed sharing and generosity never extends to everything. Things freely shared are treated as unimportant. Cows are really important for the Nuer. No one would freely share their cattle; young men learn to defend cattle with their lives; and, for that reason, they were not bought or sold.

The obligation to share food and other basic necessities is intrinsic to everyday morality in egalitarian societies (those not divided into fundamentally different sorts of being). Audrey Richards described how Bemba mothers, 'such lax disciplinarians in everything else', scold their children harshly for not offering to share an orange or some other treat with their friends (1939: 197). But sharing is also a major source of life's pleasures. The need to share is acute in the best and worst of times: during famines, but also in moments of plenty. Early accounts of native North Americans always include accounts of generosity, even to strangers, in times of famine.

The more elaborate a feast, the more likely one is to see free sharing of some things (like food and drink) and careful distribution of others: say, prize meat, whether from game or sacrifice, which is often parcelled out according to elaborate protocols or by gift exchange. These often take on a game-like quality, along with the actual contests, pageants and performances that mark a popular festival. This shared conviviality could be seen as a kind of communistic base, on which everything else is built. Sharing is not just about morality, it's also about pleasure. Solitary pleasures will always exist, but the most pleasurable activities usually involve sharing something: music, food, drugs, gossip, drama, beds. There is a communism of the senses at the root of most things we consider fun.

In communistic relations, taking accounts is considered morally offensive or just bizarre. Such relations are assumed to be eternal – or treated as such. Society will always exist. Most of us act as if our mothers will always exist (even if we know they won't); hence the absurdity of calculating reciprocity in relations with them. Beyond baseline communism, certain people and institutions are always marked out as places of solidarity and mutual aid more than others: links with mothers, wives and husbands, lovers, one's closest friends. These are the people with whom we share everything, or, at least, to whom we know we can turn in need, the definition of a true friend everywhere. Such friendships may be formalized by ritual as 'bond-friends' or 'blood-brothers' who cannot refuse each other anything. Any community is criss-crossed with relations of 'individualistic communism', personal one-to-one relations that operate, to varying degree, 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs' (Graeber, 2001; Mauss, 2009 [1947]: 104–105).

This logic may be extended within groups, and not only cooperative work groups. Any in-group defines itself by creating its own sort of baseline communism, above and beyond what applies to others. One shares *certain* things or makes them freely available within the group: help repairing one's nets in an association of fishermen, stationery supplies in an office, certain sorts of information among commodity traders, and so forth. Some categories of people we can always call on in certain situations, such as harvesting, moving house, building or repairing seafaring vessels. Finally, there is an infinite variety of 'commons', the collective administration of shared resources ('the commons'). The sociology of everyday communism is an enormous field, but our ideological blinkers have led us not to see it at all.

Communism as a principle of morality, rather than as a property arrangement, comes into play in any transaction – even commerce. If one is on sociable terms with someone, it's hard to ignore their situation. This is why shopkeepers in poor neighbourhoods are rarely of the same ethnic group as their customers. The opposite is true as well. An anthropologist in rural Java tried to improve her bargaining skills at the local bazaar. It frustrated her that she could never get prices as low as local people. A Javanese friend explained, 'They charge rich Javanese people more too.'

Unless the needs (dire poverty) and the abilities (wealth beyond imagination) are sufficiently dramatic or sociality is completely absent, communistic morality will always enter into how people take accounts. A medieval Turkish folktale about the Sufi mystic Nasruddin Hodja makes the point:

One day when Nasruddin was left in charge of the local tea-house, the king and some retainers, who had been hunting nearby, stopped in for breakfast. 'Do you have quail eggs?' asked the king. 'I'm sure I can find some,' answered Nasruddin. The king ordered an omelette of a dozen quail eggs, and Nasruddin ran out to fetch them. After the king and his party had eaten, he charged them a hundred gold pieces. The king was puzzled. 'Are quail eggs really that rare in this part of the country?' 'It's not so much quail eggs that are rare around here,' Nasruddin replied. 'It's visits from kings' (Sawhney, 2004: 111).

Exchange

Exchange is based on a fundamentally different sort of moral logic. It is all about equivalence. Each of two sides gives as good as it gets; people exchange words (in argument),

blows, even gunfire. What is at stake is not an exact equivalence – even if there were some way to measure it – but a back-and-forth process tending towards equivalence. Each side tries to outdo the other, but it's easier to break the thing off when both consider the outcome more or less even. A similar tension exists with the exchange of material goods. Often there is an element of competition; but both sides keep accounts, and, unlike communism with its notion of eternity, either party call an end to it and the whole thing is cancelled out.

With barter or commercial exchange, where both parties to the transaction are only interested in the goods, they may well – as economists insist – try to get as much as they can out of the deal. But, as anthropologists have long pointed out, when we are dealing with the exchange of gifts – that is, exchanges where the objects passing back and forth reflect on and rearrange relations between people – competition is likely to work the other way around, as a contest of generosity, of people showing off who can give more away.

Commercial exchange is 'impersonal' and the seller or buyer should be irrelevant. We are simply comparing the value of two objects; but there has to be minimal trust to carry out a transaction at all; and, unless one is dealing with a vending machine or a self-service checkout, that usually requires some outward display of sociality. Even in the most impersonal shopping mall or supermarket, clerks are expected at least to simulate personal warmth, patience and other reassuring qualities; in a Middle Eastern bazaar, an elaborate ritual establishing sociality through a sort of baseline communism – sharing tea, food or tobacco – precedes elaborate haggling in a mock battle over prices. Buyer and seller are, for that moment, friends (and so entitled to feel indignant at the other's unreasonable demands), but it's just a piece of theatre. Once the object changes hands, the two parties need never have anything to do with each other again.

Exchange allows us to cancel out our debts. If communism could be imagined as a kind of permanent mutual debt, exchange gives us a way to call it even, hence, to end the relationship. With vendors, one is often just pretending to have a relationship at all. With neighbours, one might for this very reason prefer *not* to pay one's debts. Laura Bohannon writes about arriving in a rural Nigerian Tiv community; people immediately came bearing small gifts: '... two ears of corn, one vegetable marrow, one chicken, five tomatoes, one handful of peanuts' (Bohannon, 1964: 47). She thanked them and wrote down their names and what they had brought in a notebook. Eventually, two women adopted her and explained that such gifts did have to be returned. It would be inappropriate to accept three eggs from a neighbour without bringing something back of approximately the same value. One could even bring money at a discrete interval, provided it was not the exact cost of the eggs. To bring back nothing at all was to be an exploiter or parasite, whereas an exact equivalent would suggest that one wishes to end the relationship. Tiv women might walk miles to distant homesteads to return a handful of okra or a tiny bit of change. By keeping up this constant excuse for visiting one another, a larger society is created. A trace of communism is involved here – neighbours on good terms can also be trusted to help each other in emergencies – but unlike communistic relations, which are assumed to be permanent, this sort of neighbourliness has to be constantly created and maintained because a link can be broken off at any time.

There are endless variations on this tit-for-tat gift exchange. The most familiar is the exchange of presents: I buy someone a beer; they buy me the next one. Equivalence implies equality. If I take a friend out to a fancy restaurant for dinner, after a discrete interval, they do the same. The very existence of such customs – the feeling that one really ought to return the favour – can't be explained by the principle of getting more for less in standard economic theory. But the feeling is real enough and can cause genuine strain for those of limited means trying to keep up appearances. So why, if I took a free-market economic theorist out for an expensive dinner, would he feel somewhat diminished – uncomfortably in my debt – until he could return the favour? Why might he even be inclined to take me to some place more expensive?

Recall the feasts and festivals above: here too there is shared conviviality and an element of (sometimes playful) competition. Everyone's pleasure is enhanced – who would want to eat a superb meal in a French restaurant all by themselves? Yet things can easily slip into games of one-upmanship, and hence obsession, rage, humiliation – or worse. In some societies, these games are formalized, but they only develop between people or groups who perceive themselves to be equal in status. To return to our imaginary economist, if Bill Gates or George Soros took him out to dinner, he would likely conclude he had, indeed, received something for nothing, and leave it at that. If a junior colleague or eager graduate student tried to impress him by offering to take him out somewhere, he'd think he was doing them a favour just by accepting the invitation.

In exchange, then, the objects being exchanged are to some extent equivalent. By implication, so are the people, at least when gift is met with counter-gift or money changes hands and there is no further debt or obligation – each party is free to walk away. This implies autonomy and it sits uncomfortably with monarchs, who generally dislike any sort of exchange. But within that prospect of potential cancellation, of ultimate equivalence, we find endless variations of games we can play. One can demand something from another person, knowing full well that they have the right to demand something equivalent back. Sometimes, praising another's possessions might be interpreted as a demand of this sort. In eighteenth-century New Zealand, English settlers soon learned that it was not a good idea to admire a beautiful jade pendant worn around the neck of a Maori warrior; the latter would insist on their taking it, not taking no for an answer, then, after a discrete interval, return to praise the settler's coat or gun. The only way to head this off would be to give him a gift before he could ask for one. Sometimes gifts are offered to enable making such a demand: to accept the present is to tacitly agree to allow the giver to claim whatever they deems equivalent.

All this can shade into something like barter, directly swapping one thing for another. Actually, a fair amount of barter does go on, even within commercial economies; but in the absence of a formal market and the presence of what Mauss famously called 'gift exchange', people do not generally swap one thing directly for another unless they are dealing with strangers, with whom they have no interest in maintaining social relations. Within communities, there is usually reluctance, as the Tiv example showed, to allow things to cancel out – hence, if money is in common usage, people often either refuse to use it with friends or relatives (which in a village society means pretty much everyone) or they use it in radically different ways.

Hierarchy

Relations of explicit hierarchy – that is, between parties where one is socially superior – do not operate through reciprocity at all. They are often justified by an appeal to reciprocity ('The peasants provide the food, the lords provide protection ...'), but they don't in fact operate that way. Hierarchy works rather by the logic of precedent, which, if anything, is the opposite of reciprocity.

Imagine a continuum of one-sided social relations, ranging from the most exploitative to the most benevolent. At one extreme is theft or plunder; at the other, selfless charity. Material interactions between people who otherwise have no social relationship occur at these extremes. Only a lunatic would mug their next-door neighbour. Similarly, religious traditions often insist that the only true charity is anonymous – in other words, not meant to place the recipient in one's debt. An example of this is to give gifts by stealth, in a kind of reverse burglary: to literally sneak into the recipient's house at night and plant one's present so they can never know for sure who left it.

Observe what happens between these extremes. In Belarus, gangs prey so systematically on travellers that they have the habit of giving their victims tokens, to confirm that they have already been robbed. One popular theory of the origin of states runs along similar lines. Certainly there have been times and places when conquest, untrammelled force, becomes systematized and framed not as a predatory but as a moral relation. Perhaps the justification is that the lords provide protection and the villagers provide their sustenance. But even if all parties assume they are operating by a shared moral code, where lords or even kings must operate within limits and peasants can argue about how much of the harvest the lord's retainers are entitled to carry off, they are unlikely to calculate the quality or quantity of protection said lord has recently provided. More likely they will argue in terms of custom and precedent: how much we paid last year, how much our ancestors had to pay. The same is true on the other side. If charitable donations are the basis for some sort of minimal social relation, it will not be based on reciprocity. If you give some coins to a panhandler and he recognizes you later, it will not be to return an equivalent – he is more likely to expect a similar donation. Certainly this is true if one donates money to a charitable organization. Such acts of one-sided generosity are treated as a precedent for what one might expect in future. It's the same if one gives candy to a child.

The logic of hierarchy, then, is the opposite of reciprocity. Whenever the lines of superiority and inferiority are clearly drawn and accepted by all parties and relations involve more than arbitrary force, they will be regulated by a web of habit or custom. Sometimes the situation originated in a founding act of conquest. Or it might be seen as an ancestral custom for which there is no need of explanation. Xenophon claims that in the early days of the Persian Empire each province vied to send the Great King gifts of unique and valuable products of their country. This became the basis of a tribute system, since they were soon expected to provide the same 'gifts' every year (Xenophon, *Cyropedia* VIII.6; see Briant, 2006: 193–194, 394–404). In other words, any gift to a feudal superior was likely to be treated as a precedent, added to the web of custom and as such expected to be repeated each year in perpetuity. While it is unusual for matters to become quite so formalized, any unequal social relation may begin to operate on an

analogous logic – if only because, once relations are based on ‘custom’, the only way to demonstrate a duty or obligation to do something is to show that it has been done before.

The formula goes: an action, repeated, becomes customary; it then comes to define the actor’s identity, their essential nature. It might reflect how others have acted in the past. An aristocrat insists on being *treated* as one, as in the past. The art of being such a person consists in treating oneself as you expect others to treat you: a king covers himself with gold so that others will do likewise. At the other end of the scale, this is how abuse becomes self-legitimizing. In the US, if a middle-class 13-year-old girl is kidnapped, raped and killed, this is considered a major national news story, a moral crisis for everyone with a television set. A girl of lower class who gets the same treatment is considered unremarkable, no more than one might expect.

When the parties belong to different classes, different, incommensurable sorts of things are given on either side. An apparent exception is hierarchical redistribution. One can often judge how egalitarian a society is by whether those in positions of authority are just conduits for redistribution or they can accumulate riches in their own right, as happens in aristocratic societies based on war and plunder. Anyone who comes into a very large amount of wealth will end up giving a portion of it away – often in quite grandiose and spectacular fashion and to large numbers of people. The more one’s wealth is obtained by plunder or extortion, the more spectacular and self-aggrandizing the forms in which it’s dispensed. And what applies to warrior aristocracies is all the more true of ancient states, where rulers invariably represented themselves as the protectors of the helpless, supporters of widows and orphans, and champions of the poor. The genealogy of the modern redistributive state – with its notorious proclivity for identity politics – can be traced back not to ‘primitive communism’, but ultimately to violence and war.

Shifting modalities and the heroic gift

These principles always coexist. It is hard to imagine a society where people were not communists with their closest friends and feudal lords when dealing with small children. If we ordinarily move back and forth between different modes of moral accounting, why have we failed to notice this? Perhaps it is because when we think of ‘society’ in the abstract, and particularly when we try to justify social institutions, we ultimately fall back on the rhetoric of reciprocity. Medieval society might have operated through different, largely hierarchical principles, but when clerics spoke of it in the abstract, they would reduce its ranks and orders to one simple tripartite formula for each contributing equally to all the others. ‘Some pray, some fight, still others work.’ Anthropologists likewise duly report that ‘this is how we repay our mothers for the pain of having raised us’ or puzzle over conceptual diagrams of kinship that never correspond to what real people actually do. When trying to imagine a just society, it’s hard not to evoke images of balance and symmetry, of elegant geometries where everything cancels out. ‘The market’ is, ultimately, a similar animal: a purely imaginary, abstract totality where all accounts ultimately balance.

In practice, the principles slip into each other. Hierarchical relations often include limited communistic elements (think of patronage); likewise, when ‘abilities’ and ‘needs’

prove to be disproportionate, communistic relations can easily shade into relations of inequality. Genuinely egalitarian societies invariably develop safeguards against anyone – say, good hunters in a hunting society – rising too far above themselves; just as they are suspicious of anything that might make one member a serious debtor to another. Those who draw attention to their own accomplishments are the object of mockery. Often the polite thing to do is to make fun of oneself. Peter Freuchen, who lived with Inuit in Greenland, described how the quality of a delicacy offered to guests was indicated by how much they belittled it. When a successful hunter gave him a large quantity of walrus meat, he found that you should never thank someone for food:

‘Up in our country we are human!’ said the hunter. ‘And since we are human we help each other. We don’t like to hear anybody say thanks for that. What I get today you may get tomorrow. Up here we say that by gifts one makes slaves and by whips one makes dogs.’

(Freuchen, 1961: 154)

A gift here is not something given freely, as any human would do for another, when someone has food and another needs it. Rather, to thank someone suggests they might *not* have acted that way, thereby conferring an obligation, a sense of debt – and, hence, superiority. Egalitarian collectives or political organizations in America have to come up with their own safeguards against creeping hierarchy when faced with similar dilemmas. Communism does not slip inevitably into hierarchy – the Inuit have managed to fend it off for thousands of years. But one must always guard against it.

In contrast, it’s notoriously difficult to shift relations based on communistic sharing to relations of equal exchange. We observe this all the time with friends: if someone takes advantage of your generosity, it’s often easier to break off relations than to demand they pay you back. This too is a common dilemma. The Maori tell of a notorious glutton who irritated fishermen along the coast by always asking for the best portions of their catch. Since to refuse a direct request for food was impossible, they would hand it over; until one day enough was enough, people formed a war party, ambushed and killed him (Firth, 1959 [1929]: 411–412).

Creating a ground of sociability among former strangers – what I’ve called baseline communism – can often require testing the other’s limits. In Madagascar, when two merchants form a pact of blood brotherhood, both parties swear they will never refuse any request from the other. In practice, people are circumspect with their requests. But at first, they like to test it out. One may demand the other’s house, the shirt off their back, or (everyone’s favourite example) the right to spend the night with their new partner’s wife. The only limit is that demands should be reciprocal. This is just a phase leading to the establishment of trust.

The heroic gift, in contrast, occurs when relations of exchange threaten to break down into hierarchy, as when two parties act like equals, trading gifts or blows or commodities, but someone does something that completely flips the scale. Such ‘fighting with property’ is typical of aristocratic warrior societies and is marked by ritualized boasting and vainglory (these heroes talk themselves up just as much as hunters talk themselves down), and one must not take such statements literally, as Mauss (1990 [1925]: 42) did, when he concluded that the losers in a Kwakiutl potlatch might really be reduced to

slaves. The consequences could be real enough. In a separate article, Mauss (1925) cites Posidonius' account of Celtic festivals where nobles unable to return a magnificent gift committed suicide, and William Miller (1993: 15–16) provides another from the Eddas, where a Viking, not wishing to compose a poem celebrating a friend's generosity after he left him an incomparable treasure, tried to track his friend down and kill him.

The very complexity in gifts – which so often form the nexus where different moral orders intersect, shade into one another, and shift back and forth – has allowed them to become such an endlessly rich subject for philosophical reflection; yet to insist on treating gifts as a unitary category has stood in the way of understanding what these moral principles actually are.

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