

## **The Ambivalence of Gift-Giving**

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### **Abstract**

The French socio-anthropologist Marcel Mauss argues that all human societies are governed by the logic of gift-exchange. This involves a triple obligation: People are obliged to give, to receive, and to reciprocate gifts. Both the universality and ethical meaning of Mauss's logic of the gift have been contested. Concerning its universality, Maurice Godelier and others have argued that societies define themselves according to what is included in the domain of what can be exchanged, i.e. by the line dividing the sacred from the profane (secular). Concerning its ethical meaning, the question has arisen: is gift-giving an instance of genuine altruism or solidarity? Mary Douglas and Pierre Bourdieu argue that it is not. Both emphasize the ambivalence of gift-giving: it is at once both free and compulsory, and often an expression of both solidarity and superiority. Despite these two lines of criticism, this paper argues that Mauss's logic of the gift, even if embodied in the structure of ambivalence, is of great importance for the development of social ethics and ensuring human progress and thus ought to be recognized as normative (moral/ethical value).

**Keywords:** Altruism, Ambivalence, Gift-Giving, Interest/Disinterest, Freedom/Obligation, Reciprocity, Normativity, Solidarity, Potlatch, Kula.

### **1. Introduction**

Marcel Mauss maintains that a set of triple obligations – giving, receiving and reciprocating gifts – lies at the foundation of all human societies. In examining these three obligations, we find that the logic of the gift is inherently ambiguous. Analysis of the two primary examples of the archaic forms of gift-exchange (i.e. the '*potlatch*' and '*kula*') has yielded textual evidence showing the ambivalent structure of the total services and counter-services: they are at once both interested and disinterested, both free and obligatory, and supportive of both solidarity and hierarchy. The ambivalent character of these polar opposites is built into the logic of the gift, and one cannot understand Mauss's logic of the gift without appreciating this ambivalence.

This paper proceeds in four stages. Section I investigates textual evidence for the ambivalent structure inherent both in the two primary examples of gift-exchange (the *potlatch* and *kula*) and in the triple obligations – to give, to receive and to reciprocate gifts. Section II examines the paradoxes in this logic that directly challenge the claim that the logic of gift-exchange is the universal basis of human societies. In section III, it is questioned whether gift-giving is so

concerned with the well-being of others as is generally supposed. Finally, in section IV, it is argued that Mauss's logic of the gift, even if embodied in the structure of ambivalence, is of great importance for the development of social ethics and thus ought to be recognized as normative (moral/ethical value).

## 2. The Notion of Ambivalence and Its Meaning

A synoptic account of the notion of ambivalence and its meaning will help us to understand better the ambivalence of the gift and gift-giving practices, which is the principle objective of this paper. The Swiss psychiatrist Paul Eugen Bleuler has coined the German term '*Ambivalenz*' in the early twentieth century, which then became the English 'ambivalence.' According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word 'ambivalence' is a combination of the Latin prefix "*ambi-*," meaning "both or in two ways" and *valentia*, "vigour or strength." The etymological meaning of the word refers to the coexistence of contradictions within the psyche, such as love and hate, or positive and negative feelings about a person or thing (object). It is the idea that a person is psychologically pulled in opposite directions by two equally strong forces. Robert K. Merton, drawing on Bleuler's idea, identifies ambivalences on three levels of personal life. He identifies "the emotional (or affective) type in which the same object arouses both positive and negative feelings, as in parent-child relations; the voluntary (or conative) type in which conflicting wishes make it difficult or impossible to decide how to act; and the intellectual (or cognitive) type, in which men hold contradictory ideas" (Merton, 1976:3). Zygmunt Bauman explains that 'ambivalence' as "the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category, is a language-specific disorder: a failure of the naming (segregating) function that language is meant to perform" (1991:1). Bauman's explanation of ambivalence, in the context of modernity, primarily concerns the semiotic conditions related to the use and function of language. Ambivalence likely gives rise to feelings of "discomfort," but it is not regarded as a "pathology of language or speech. It is, rather, a normal aspect of linguistic practice" (1991:1). Harry G. Frankfurt calls 'ambivalence' a "type of psychic instability or conflict" of the will (1999:98).<sup>1</sup> He also argues that "[a]mbivalence is constituted by conflicting volitional movements or tendencies, either conscious or unconscious" (1999:99). Although ambivalence is identified with a conflict or division of the will, it is not seen as a "cognitive deficiency." Thus, the acceptance of ambivalence can at times seem "helpful or wise" but "it is never desirable as such or for its own sake" (1999:102). In a normal sense, ambivalence is generally regarded as a positive quality, but in its more extreme forms it can be seen as a disorder or as "pathological." However, Frankfurt claims that ambivalence is "so integral to our fundamental experience of ourselves that [it serves] to define, at least in part, the inescapable human condition" (2006:5; see also 1999). Alena Ledeneva notes that "[i]n psychoanalysis, ambivalence is often associated with ambiguity, but the differences are significant." What is helpful for the argument pursued here is the clear distinction Ledeneva makes between ambivalence and ambiguity. She argues that "ambivalence is a bi-polar concept, not multi-polar as the case with ambiguity. Its poles (thesis and anti-thesis) are defined and there is little uncertainty as to what these poles, or co-existing views, attitudes and beliefs are." Maurice Godelier expresses the idea of ambivalence very plainly, as "[t]wo opposite movements ... contained in a single act" (1999:12).

Given the many and various meanings of ambivalence, I shall define ambivalence as follows: The simultaneous coexistence of more than one contradictory reasons or motives, influenced by an array of various other factors. These reasons, motivations, and other factors can prompt a rational agent to undertake a particular action or behaviour, such as gift-giving.

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<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt explains the sense in which he is speaking of the "will." He writes, that will "is not coextensive with the notion of first-order desires. It is not the notion of something that merely inclines an agent in some degree to act in a certain way. Rather, it is the notion of an *effective* desire – one that moves (or will or would move) a person all the way to action" (1988:14).

Ambivalence in gift-giving is neither entirely consistent with self-interest (as economic rationality would suggest) nor expressive of a purely altruistic motivation. Rather, the coexistence of more than one contradictory motivation can be a good explanation for a single act of giving a gift. Following the insights of Mauss, I argue that gift-giving is always ambivalent and that recognizing this fact as normative moral/ethical value is important for the development of human communities and progress of social ethics. In considering the main claims of the Mauss's *The Gift*, and how its triple obligations are embedded in the structure of ambivalence, I will show how the logic of ambivalence is operative in the total system of gift-exchange.

## 2.2 Two Primary Examples of Gift-Exchange: The 'Potlatch' and The 'Kula'

### 2.2.1 The Potlatch

Any investigation into Mauss's *The Gift* must consider the two primary archaic forms of transaction that Mauss focuses on – 'potlatch' and 'kula.'<sup>2</sup> Let's start with a discussion of the potlatch. The meaning of the term 'potlatch' can be roughly described as the ceremonial exchange of gifts or the distribution of wealth in order to acquire prestige, honour and social rank or status among the peoples of the Northwest Coast.<sup>3</sup> The notion of *ambivalence*, contained in the triadic structure of obligations or in the archaic forms of transaction, is also apparent in the total system of gift-exchange.

Mauss's consideration of the salient features of the potlatch is the 'project grandiose' of *The Gift*, and it runs like a guiding thread throughout the book. Marcel Fournier states, "The study of the potlatch was more than a shared concern: it was a true research program, and "The Gift" was only a fragment of it" (2006:241). Christopher Johnson argues that "the potlatch is the point of reference from which these other cultures [Polynesian and Melanesian] are viewed and against which they are measured" (1996:311). The phenomenon of potlatch, as the total system of exchange, is shown to be a typical characteristic of the peoples or tribes of Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian and Kwakiutl, who live on the Northwest Coast. On various occasions, Mauss explicitly states, "The potlatch itself ... is none other than the system of gifts exchanged" (1990:35).<sup>4</sup> The potlatch is also described as "a kind of monstrous product of the system of presents" or "the word potlatch signifies gift" (pp. 42, 43). The total system of gift exchange is 'ambivalent' because the act of giving, receiving and reciprocating gifts is at once free/compulsory, interested/disinterested, egoistic/altruistic and entails solidarity/hierarchy. Mauss does not use the term 'ambivalence,' but there is ample evidence for the intermingling of opposed motives and given this it seems that the notion of ambivalence is implied. Mauss explains that the "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... We propose to call all this the *system of total services*" (pp. 5-6, emphasis in original).

The potlatch is an archaic form of contract, always performed by groups rather than individuals. The celebration of the potlatch is distinctively 'collective' in its nature. People of different clans, tribes and families, as collective and legal entities, establish the contract

<sup>2</sup> As Mary Douglas rightly notes, "Read this [the potlatch] too fast and you miss the meaning" (1990: viii).

<sup>3</sup> Potlatch also means organizing "large-scale gatherings" on important "ritual, social, and political events" that involve "feasting, dancing, singing, and orations" (Isabelle Schulte-Tenckhoff, 2001:167).

<sup>4</sup> Hereinafter, all references from this book are cited by page number in the main text. See also (1997[1924]).

through the exchange of gifts with one another, either in groups or through the leadership of their tribal chiefs or in both these ways at once. Mauss, in observing the fact of collective sociality evident in all archaic societies, writes that “it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other” (p. 5). In this total system of exchange, not only are various goods and services exchanged, but also “acts of politeness” are performed, such as “banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs.” The “economic transaction” is regarded as “only one element ... only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract” (p. 5). The total system of gift-exchange, in fact, uncovers the significant notion of the “*total social facts*,” which refers to “the totality of society and its institutions” that includes other phenomena, such as, “juridical, economic, religious, moral, political, even aesthetic and morphological, etc.” (pp. 78-79). For Mauss, the study of ‘total social facts’ has two implications most relevant to our purposes here: namely, that these facts have a certain ‘universal’ character that can be applicable to the general functioning of human community/society, and that his aim is to study ‘social things’ as they are, in the most concrete way possible (p. 80).

In all these tribes, “the principle of rivalry and hostility” prevails in all transactions and particularly in services and counter-services. Rivalry, in its extreme form, results in a violent “destruction of wealth” that leads rival chiefs in a state to subject other (actual or potential rival) chiefs and their tribes to greater obligations of debt (p. 6).<sup>5</sup> The tribal chiefs carry out the acts of total services and counter-services in excessive forms of violent behaviour that are essentially “usurious and sumptuary” and which mark the total system of gift-exchange with an “agonistic character.” The intention or motive disguised in the whole display of aggressive behaviour by the chiefs is nothing but a “struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves.” In light of all this, Mauss describes the potlatch as “*total services of an agonistic type*” (pp. 6-7, emphasis in original). The total system of services and counter-services between tribes and their families basically appears to be of this kind, but in actuality the exchange of contracts is of various types. Forms of rivalry and destruction of wealth can be either acute or moderate. All who willingly enter into contracts “seek to outdo one another in their gifts,” and also “vie with one another in [their] presents of thanks, banquets and weddings, and in simple invitations” (p. 7). Mauss, in his second general conclusion, reaffirms the ambivalent dynamics of interest/disinterest, freedom/obligation, and solidarity/hierarchy inherent in the giving of gifts as well as in the destruction of wealth. He explains, “Even pure destruction of wealth does not signify that complete detachment that one might believe to be found in it. Even these acts of greatness are not without egoism. [...] [T]he reason for these gifts and frenetic acts of wealth consumption [destruction] is in no way disinterested, particularly in societies that practice the potlatch” (p. 74). Having shown that even the apparently noblest act of generosity or disinterestedness in giving gifts is masked with interest, Mauss argues that the social hierarchy is maintained by such gift-giving: “To give is to show one’s superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, *magister*. To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower (*minister*)” (p. 74, emphasis in original).

Mauss says little explicitly about the notion of ‘solidarity,’ but it is clearly implicit in the dynamics of the total system of gift-exchange. For instance, the very idea of solidarity can be explained in relation to generosity or extravagance. The tribal chiefs are lavish and exorbitant in giving grand potlatches, by which they not only share food or gifts but also redistribute their wealth and offer hospitality to others on their visits. In this sense, “[t]hey hoard, but in order to spend, to place under an obligation, to have their own ‘liege men’” (p. 75). Just as they are known for their exaggerated hostility and rivalry, so also they are known for their

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<sup>5</sup> Schulte-Tenckhoff considers “excessive rivalry” and “destruction of property” as “the exception rather than the rule” (Schulte-Tenckhoff, 2001:168). Georges Bataille provides an excellent description of the potlatch as the “gift of rivalry” in his theory of the general economy. I do not discuss this point at length here, but for more on it see (1985, 2013[1967]).

hospitality. Acts of generosity, particularly in giving gifts, mutually benefit both giver and receiver. In this light, as Mauss puts it, “It is in such a state of mind that men have abandoned their reserve [wealth] and have been able to commit themselves to giving and giving in return” (pp. 81-82). Remarkably, it is in this extreme manner that they “have learnt how to oppose and give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another. [...] This is one of the enduring secrets of their wisdom and solidarity” (pp. 82-83).

In Polynesian societies, specifically Samoa, Mauss identified an institution (a system of exchange) quite similar to the potlatch. “[I]n Samoa,” he writes, there is “the remarkable custom of exchanging emblazoned matting between chiefs on the occasion of a marriage, which did not appear to us to go beyond this level [of the system of total services]” (p. 8). Moreover, he shows that this total system of gift-exchange is not limited only to the event of marriage but goes far beyond it, taking place also on other important occasions or during other events or festivities, such as “the birth of a child, circumcision, sickness, a daughter’s arrival at puberty, funeral rites, trade” (p. 8). Mauss compares this system with the potlatch of the Northwest American tribes and finds the Polynesian system lacking “elements of *rivalry*, *destruction*, and *combat*” (p. 8, emphasis added). In both systems, however, the “exchange-through-gift is the rule” that is at once interested and disinterested, free and obligatory (p. 18). Having shown the presence of the potlatch in Polynesia, Mauss identifies two other components that make the potlatch legitimate. He points to “the honour, prestige, and *mana* conferred by wealth; and the absolute obligation to reciprocate these gifts under pain of losing that *mana*, that authority – the talisman and source of wealth that is authority itself” (p. 8). He argues that it is not only honour or prestige, but also an ‘absolute obligation’ to reciprocate the gifts. On the whole, giving and returning of gifts is at once both free and compulsory.<sup>6</sup> Mauss describes the important object which is used or carried by the tribal chiefs at the celebration of the potlatch. The “emblazoned copper objects” are regarded as the “basic goods for the potlatch.” The copper objects, as the property of the chief, are simultaneously thought to bring wealth, good luck, and rank. The exchange of gifts becomes more intelligible and the acts of giving and returning gifts are shown not only to imply respect or courtesy, but also to amount to a giving of oneself. Mauss states that “by giving [gifts] one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one ‘owes’ *oneself* – one’s person and one’s goods – to others” (p. 46, emphasis in original).

### 2.2.2 The Kula

The second major example of the archaic forms of transaction or ceremonial system of gift-exchange is the “*Kula*,” first studied by Bronislaw Malinowski. Drawing on Malinowski’s account of the “*kula* ring,” Mauss identifies the same working dynamics of a system of total services and counter-services that are at once interested and disinterested, free and obligatory, among the Melanesians, and then compares it to the potlatch of the Northwest American tribes. The chief aim here is to highlight the ambivalent structure of gift and counter-gift, which is so obviously operative in the intertribal *kula* trade.

Mauss explicitly notes that the Melanesians, more than the peoples of Polynesia, have “preserved and developed the whole system of gifts” (p. 20). Yet the *kula* of Trobriand Islands and the *potlatch* of Northwest Americans are different in several respects. As Mauss states, “in certain aspects even the *kula* is less characteristic than the American potlatch” (p. 99, n. 18). This implies that the *kula* is one of the grand, solemn, and noble intertribal systems of gift-exchange or a part of the system of total services and counter-services (the potlatch). An illustration makes this more evident: “The *kula*,” Mauss writes, “its essential form, is itself

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<sup>6</sup> Other than the triple obligations – to give, to receive, and to reciprocate gifts, Mauss briefly discusses, as a fourth theme, the giving of gifts or presents to human beings and to the gods as well. I will not pursue this point further here due to constraints of space, but for a full discussion see *The Gift*, pp. 14-17.

only one element, the most solemn one, in a vast system of services rendered and reciprocated” (p. 27). He considers the *kula* a kind of “grand potlatch” or “busy intertribal trade” extending throughout the archipelago of the Trobriand Islands. For Mauss, *kula* literally means “circle,” in which are exchanged all kinds of services and counter-services, for example, precious things, useful objects, foods and festivals, ritual and sexual services, in a manner at once interested/disinterested, free/obligatory (pp. 21-22).

The *kula* trade is of a “noble kind.” It is mainly reserved for tribal chiefs, who often lead the tribes as they go to engage in the intertribal exchange of gifts or in great sea expeditions across the Islands. Though the *kula* trade seems to have uniquely impressive or admirable qualities, it resembles the potlatch of the Northwest Americans. The *kula* trade is “carried on in a noble fashion,” Mauss writes. “It is distinguished carefully from the mere economic exchange of useful goods, which is called *gimwali*. [...] It [*gimwali*] is marked by very hard bargaining between the two parties, a practice unworthy of the *kula*” (p. 22). The noble intertribal exchange of gifts entails the economic exchange of material goods (*gimwali*) and the ceremonial exchanges of all kinds of services and counter-services (gifts) that are simultaneously at work in all the transactions of the primitive markets. Having shown that the intertribal trade is not, in its entirety, carried out in the pursuit of self-interest, Mauss notes another significant aspect of the gift-exchange, namely the obligation to reciprocate the gifts. “In appearance, at the very least, the *kula* – as in the potlatch of the American Northwest – consists in giving by some, and receiving by others. The recipients of one day become the givers on the next” (p. 22). This clearly implies that the gift is not given freely but rather that the receiver of the gift is subjected to an obligation of debt, which has to be given in return or reciprocated in another way on an appropriate occasion.

Another element of the intertribal *kula* trade is the “solemn” way in which gifts are given. For instance, the tribal chief (the giver), who brings his gifts solemnly and whose arrival is accompanied by music, for example by “the sound of a seashell,” shows extreme “modesty” in giving gifts. The giver, while considering his own gifts the smallest to be given, throws down his gifts at the feet of his rival chief and partner (pp. 22-23). This solemn act of transferring the gifts in fact conceals the intentions of the giver, and this makes for the ambivalence of gift-giving. Mauss explicitly states, “The aim of all this is to display generosity, freedom, and autonomous action, as well as greatness. Yet, all in all, it is mechanisms of obligation, and even of obligation through things, that are called into play” (p. 23).

The “*vaygu’a*” is “a kind of money,” which, like copper, is considered an essential object of the intertribal *kula* trade or system of gift-exchange. The *vaygu’a* is of two kinds: it includes bracelets (*mwali*), which is a feminine symbol, and necklaces (*soulava*), which is a masculine symbol. These are exchanged mostly in a circular movement, but in opposite directions (pp. 23, 26).<sup>7</sup> Both kinds of money are secured as treasures of valuable objects for “sheer pleasure” and “prestige.” Moreover, the exchange of these objects is considered the source of wealth or “fortune” by the Trobriand people. The *vaygu’a* are not supposed to be kept for a longer time, but those who receive them are obliged to give them in return or pass them on to another. All of this is evident in what Mauss says: “There are even occasions, such as in the preparation of funeral ceremonies, of great *s’oi*, when it is permitted always to receive and to give nothing in return. Yet this is in order to give back everything and to spend everything, when the festival has begun” (p. 23). In this exchange of gifts, Mauss does not speak explicitly of the gifts being interested/disinterested and free/obligatory, yet such a meaning is substantially implied.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the *mwali* is passed on from west to east and the *soulava* from east to west, yet the reasons for these directions of circulation are not known. As in the case of the copper objects, these objects must be given away in their proper time.

In the intertribal *kula* trade, the opening gift, the *vaygu'a*, is of capital importance, for it initiates the “whole series of other exchanges.” This initial gift initiates the indefinite and uninterrupted series of gift-exchange that goes on in the circle of the *kula* trade. The opening gift constitutes the beginning of the circular movement of gift-exchange or “the principle of the *kula*, [which] begins with a first gift, the *vaga*.” This can be obtained as “means of inducements” (p. 27). The recipient of the first gift can also be a donor in the future and will benefit from the series of other gifts that follow after the initial ones. There seems to be uncertainty concerning one’s giving and receiving of the first gift (the *vaga*), but the giver can be sure of its return. Just as the acceptance of the initial gift assures its return, so the return gift or giving in return completes the obligation of the circle of gift-exchange. “To accept it is to bind oneself definitively to making a gift of the *vaga*, the first present that is sought after. But one is still only half committed as a partner. Only the solemn observance of the tradition [reciprocating the gifts] commits one completely” (p. 28). Having demonstrated how the intertribal *kula* trade entails the triadic structure of giving, receiving and reciprocating gifts, which is simultaneously interested and disinterested, free and obligatory, Mauss notes various other motives that also play a crucial role in the *kula* exchange of gifts, namely, “[c]ompetition, rivalry, ostentatiousness, the seeking after the grandiose, and the stimulation of interest” (p. 28).

Mauss also notes other aspects of the *kula* trade, namely, competition and rivalry, that are identical to the potlatch of the Northwest Americans. “Even the themes of combat and rivalry appear. In it, clans and phratries, and families allied to one another, confront one another” (p. 30). Such exaggerated dynamics of hostility and generosity, festival and battle, or friendship and rivalry appear “insane” to the modern mind, but that was the system of sociality by which the total services and counter-services are exchanged. All these features seem to closely resemble the agonistic character of the potlatch. Having confirmed the fact of the constant exchange of gifts, Mauss decisively reaffirms that the nature of gift-exchange, with its triple obligations, is at once free and obligatory. He writes, “[t]he process is marked by a continuous flow in all directions of presents given, accepted, and reciprocated, obligatorily and out of self-interest, by reasons of greatness and for services rendered, through challenges and pledges” (p. 29). In this respect, the system of “barter” appears to exist only in a very few transactions and this is not what is commonly practiced by the Trobriand Islanders. Having said this, Mauss makes the significant point that “it does not seem that [gift] exchange is really free” (p. 30). This implies that what is given and received is not, in its entirety, a free gift, but that the recipient is obliged to give in return and that only in this way will the circle of the *kula* trade, the circle of total services and counter-services, be completed.

Malinowski considered “the type of pure gift would be the gift between man and wife” (p. 73). In contrast, Mauss argues that “all sexual relationships throughout humanity, consists of comparing the *mapula*, the ‘constant’ payment made by the man to his wife, as a kind of salary for sexual services rendered” (p. 73). The same point is stressed differently in another place: “all the economic and juridical relationships between the sexes within marriage: the services of all kinds rendered to the wife by her husband are considered as a *remuneration-cum-gift* for the service rendered by the wife when she lends what the Koran still calls ‘the field’” (p. 30, emphasis added). The point to be underscored here is that the gift is neither free nor disinterested but is always both: free and compulsory and interested and disinterested. “All in all, just as these gifts are not freely given, they are also not really disinterested. They already represent for the most part total counter-services, not only made with a view to paying for services or things, but also to maintaining a profitable alliance” (p. 73). Clearly, then, all kinds of services and counter-services, particularly in the relationship between (husband and wife), are at once free/obligatory, interested/disinterested, and both a gift and a payment. This example notably unveils the fact of ambivalence, which is obscured in the nature of gift-exchange and its triple obligations. I now proceed to discuss the triple obligations of gift-giving.

## 2.3 The Triple Obligations: To Give, To Receive and To Reciprocate Gifts

Reciprocal obligation, according to Mauss, creates two important social systems. First, it creates a sort of social relationship (“legal tie”) between the gift-giver and gift-receiver. This relation between persons or groups also implies a bond between “souls” (p. 12). Second, it establishes the very logic of gift-giving. We have an obligation to give back or return to the donor what really belongs to him or her. The three obligations – to give, to receive and to reciprocate the presents or gifts – are essential to understanding the institution of ‘total services’ and the potlatch. Mauss also explains, “The institution of ‘total services’ does not merely carry with it the obligation to reciprocate presents received. It also supposes two other obligations: to give presents and to receive them” (p. 13). In this respect, the obligation to give gifts and to receive them are shown to complement the obligation to reciprocate gifts. These three obligations are closely interrelated and held to be equally important to the logic of gift-giving or gift-exchange. The obligation to give gifts is the first move in this total system of gift-exchange, as it establishes a social relationship between persons or groups. The obligation to receive gifts offers an opportunity to accept and enter into a social bond. Hence, the obligations to give and to receive gifts are inextricably connected and together establish a social tie, through the medium of gift-exchange. As Mauss writes, “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” (p. 13).

The implication of ambivalence is clearly evident in the preceding discussion of the triple obligation. According to Mauss, “*The obligation to give is the essence of the potlatch*” (p. 39, emphasis in original). Why does one want to give gifts? Why is it obligatory? What is in it for the giver? All these questions and many more arise from Mauss’s account. The tribal chief has the obligation to give gifts (potlatch), first “for himself” and then for others. Only by giving gifts can he “preserve his authority” and “maintain his rank” over and among the other chiefs, tribes, villages and even his own family. When a chief generously gives gifts or shares his richness or wealth with others, he proves “his good fortune” and, by his generous gifts, keeps others under his control, thus humiliating them (p. 39). In the potlatch, failing to give is equivalent to losing one’s “face” or “*persona*,” which stands for one’s identity (Mauss, 1979:59-94). For Mauss, “To lose one’s prestige is indeed to lose one’s soul” (p. 39). Moreover, losing prestige in the game of gift-giving is precisely analogous to losing in a battle or sports or gambling. Hence, there is no reason for anyone to hesitate to give gifts; one rather hastens to give them. If one has been a beneficiary of the systems of gift-giving or potlatch, naturally one is obliged to give gifts. If one has no obligation to acknowledge the gifts or services performed by chiefs, vassals, and relatives, still a failure to do so would violate rules of etiquette or politeness. Moreover, it would, to some extent, strip the nobles or chiefs of their rank or hierarchy. Failing in one’s obligation to give gifts, in its extremity, one can incur “fatal” or “political consequences” (p. 40; p. 120, n. 179).

Gift-giving, in its various forms, is also said to be an act of “recognition.” The chief or his son is recognized when the chief gives gifts on the important occasions, such as the birth, naming, marriage and enthronement of his son. Mauss writes, “The potlatch, the distribution of goods, is the basic act of ‘recognition’, military, juridical, economic, and religious in every sense of the word” (p. 40). On the contrary, when a chief purposefully avoids or omits to invite other clans, who themselves claim to be high in social standing (rank) among other clans of the same tribe, they will not hesitate to destroy everything that belongs to the chief, because they do not want to be socially excluded from the other clans and thus be rendered “profane” (pp. 40-41).

The second obligation is “*to accept*” gifts. This is no less constraining than the obligation “*to give*” gifts. Why is one obliged to accept gifts? Can such a claim seem reasonable from a

liberal point of view, according to which an individual's freedom and equality are given greater priority? In today's context, this logic may appear odd and hardly possible to understand. In archaic societies, however, the case was different: that is, "in principle every gift is always accepted and even praised." In case the gift is refused or not accepted, what would be the implication? Mauss explains as follows: "One has no right to refuse a gift, or to refuse to attend the potlatch. To act in this way is to show that one is afraid of having to reciprocate, to fear being 'flattened' [i.e. losing one's name] until one has reciprocated" (p. 41).<sup>8</sup> Refusing to accept gifts either leaves one in a state of being defeated or leads to defeat in advance; it shows that one is a "victor" and "invincible" by making richer gifts. Accepting gifts also becomes obligatory, in the sense that one is committing oneself or being "indebted" to reciprocate gifts. In this respect, Mauss notes, "A gift is received 'with a burden attached'" (p. 41). The obligation to accept gifts implies more of a challenge to prove one's ability to reciprocate gifts and show that one is not "unequal" or inferior to the other. This does not deny, of course, the material benefits of receiving gifts. The obligation to accept gifts also entails that one preserves one's social status as a giver of gifts. Hence, Mauss writes, "To refrain from giving, just as to refrain from accepting, is to lose rank – as is refraining from reciprocating" (p. 41). Failing in any of these three obligations – to give, to receive, and to reciprocate gifts – has the same result, namely a loss of one's rank or prestige.

The third obligation, "*to reciprocate*" gifts, highlights certain features of the logic of the gift which merit close attention. The obligation to reciprocate gifts, while completing the cycle of exchange, makes the one "enter into real contracts" and is that which truly '*seals*' the contract between the contracting parties, either individuals or groups (p. 7). In the text, there are instances where the notion of repaying with "interest" is emphasized together with reciprocal obligation. Furthermore, Mauss writes, "One loses [one's] face for ever if one does not reciprocate [gifts], or if one does not carry out destruction of equivalent value" (p. 42). To this extent, reciprocal obligation becomes an "imperative" and a way to elude the loss of one's identity. Failing in one's reciprocal obligation not only involves a loss of honour and prestige but also places one in "slavery for debt." The total system of services and counter-services, in which almost everything exchanged is not wholly free or obligatory but at once both free and obligatory, interested and disinterested – in this manifesting the ambivalence of gift-giving. What is evident in the preceding discussion of the triple obligations is that Mauss has not explained the reasons/motives for giving gifts. He has stated that the reason is what he calls 'the spirit of things.' But can this substantially explain the triple obligations?

## 2.4 Is 'The Spirit of Things' a Reason/Motive?

Mauss's account of the triple obligations involved in gift-giving is clearest in his statement of the following two seminal questions: "*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?*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Based on a suggestion in a Maori text, Mauss states that there is a spiritual force inherent in the things given that pushes for reciprocation. He repeats the same point in different places.<sup>9</sup> This is what the Maoris call the *hau* of the things. Yet this assertion does not solve the problem, and its interpretation has provoked a wide discussion among

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<sup>8</sup> It is also noted that to be 'flattened' would also mean to "lose the weight attached to one's name." Mauss further explains that among the Tlingit tribes, when the invited guests delay coming to the potlatch for two years or more than an appropriate time, they are called "women" (pp. 41, 120, n. 185).

<sup>9</sup> "The most important feature among these spiritual mechanisms is clearly one that obliges a person to reciprocate the present that has been received" (p. 7); "the things exchanged ... possess a special intrinsic power, which causes them to be given and above all to be reciprocated" (p. 38); "in the things exchanged during the potlatch, a power is present that forces gifts to be passed around, to be given, and returned" (p. 43).

scholars and especially among anthropologists like Raymond Firth, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Marshall Sahlins.

A brief summary of their contentions, without going into a detailed review, will serve the purpose here. Raymond Firth regards Mauss's interpretation of the *hau* as itself an "irrational belief" (2011[1929]:412) lacking a solid (rational) foundation. Instead, he explains that "the social sanctions – the desire to continue useful economic relations, the maintenance of prestige and power [or 'reputation']" (2011[1929]:415)<sup>10</sup> makes the recipient fulfill his or her reciprocal obligation by returning the gifts. Lévi-Strauss criticizes Mauss for being too empirical and failing to analyze indigenous beliefs, by which he thinks Mauss has been "mystified." Lévi-Strauss, in his critique of Mauss, has argued for the "symbolic origin of society" out of "unconscious mental structures" (1987[1950]:47, 49). Marshall Sahlins's publication of an article (in 1970) marked an important shift in the debate on this issue. Sahlins's detailed study of the Tamati Ranaipiri's Maori text concludes that Mauss omitted reference to the "*whangai hau* rite," which basically provides the context in which many meanings for the word "*hau*" can be found. He also finds that Mauss wrongly interprets "the spirit of things," which makes the gifts return to its original owner. Thus Sahlins rejects Mauss's spiritual interpretation. He suggests that the *hau* is a kind of "material yield" of a gift. The priests sacrifice an animal to the gods of the forest. They assure the hunters of success in their hunting party. However, the hunters have to give back part of the game to the priests. Hence, the ritual of sacrifice can be seen a kind of investment in the goodwill of the priests of the forest. This means that Sahlins interprets the *hau* as "a general principle of productivity or fecundity or fertility" (1972:168). The initial donor or giver has rights over the benefits produced by the first gift, which, in other words, implies that the "return on or product of [or] yield on a [initial] gift ought to be handed over [or given in return] to the original donor" (1972:157). Jacques T. Godbout and Alain Caillé note that "the 'indigenous' interpretation...to which Mauss himself was most attracted, remains enigmatic and incomplete" (2000[1998]:118). Fournier writes, "The essay considered the notion of *hau* as a starting point, not an endpoint" (2006:242). From all this we may conclude that what Mauss strongly believed and presumed to be the answer (*raison d'être*) to his two questions, noted above, hardly provides reasons/motives for or an explanation of the logic of the gift. Logically, then, the task at hand is to discover the reasons and motives, other than the spirit of things, underlying and animating the logic of the gift.

No single reason or motivation can explain the whole dynamics of gift-giving practices, for there is a great variety of reasons and motives for both the gift and counter-gift. Recognizing this, Antoon Vanderveelde, among many others, identifies a range of reasons for gift-giving practices: feelings of debt towards the donor incite the practices of gift and counter-gift; gift-giving is a kind of implicit insurance policy, by which the donor pays a premium in the form of a gift and is able to reclaim solidarity in case of emergency in the future; one is unwilling to take advantage of another's goodwill; one wishes to maintain one's good reputation; or one is simply altruistic (2000:4). Vanderveelde also identifies motives that might lead one to bequeath wealth to family and friends upon one's death. There are altruistic, accidental, strategic, paternalistic, retrospective and capitalistic inheritance motives (2000:4-7; 1997:8-10). Peter Verhezen explains that indebtedness, as well as a desire to be sociable and avoid embarrassment and humiliation, are possible reasons for giving gifts and counter-gifts (2009:47). What is most significant to our inquiry is that these reasons cannot be reduced to a single thought, motive, paradigm, or interest. As an alternative, Vanderveelde groups the reasons into four categories, finding that some of them can be incorporated or accommodated within a single type. They are: "*instrumental* or *strategic gifts* – aiming at the promotion of the interest of the donator; *altruistic gifts* – exclusively aiming at the well-being of others; *expressive gifts* – embodying a feeling, an identity or social relations; and *agonistic gifts* –

<sup>10</sup> He also mentions "the fear of witchcraft," which appears to be "vague and problematical."

when identity, dignity and honour are subject to alterations and repeated changes” (2000:7-8, emphasis in original).<sup>11</sup>

### 3. The Paradox of ‘Keeping-while-Giving’

Annette B. Weiner, drawing on her fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands, drew on the ethnographic data she collected to construct an alternative theory of the dynamics of exchange. Malinowski, she argues, over-reduced the range of various exchange activities to the simple mode of gift and counter-gift based on the structure of reciprocity, which he held to be the basic mechanism of social relations between peoples in archaic societies (1992:2). Mauss, whose work led Weiner to investigate these questions, is criticized for inscribing the ambivalent structure of triple obligations – to give, receive, and reciprocate gifts – into the regulatory dynamics of reciprocity embedded in the spirit of things given in exchange. To the contrary, Weiner sets out to argue that “all exchange is predicated on a universal paradox – how to *keep-while-giving*” (1992:5, emphasis in original). Before examining this paradox, let me note Weiner’s basic premise: “What motivates reciprocity is its reverse – the desire to keep something back from the pressures of give and take. This something is a possession that speaks to and for an individual’s or a group’s social identity and, in so doing, affirms the difference between one person or group and another. Because the ownership of inalienable possessions establishes difference, ownership attracts other kinds of wealth” (1992:43). While most positions in the long-standing anthropological debates over the nature of gift-exchange are based on an ‘act of reciprocity’ that must be grounded on the reasons/motivations of rational agents, Weiner explains gift-exchange in terms of ‘objects’ that are kept out of circulation (inalienable or unexchangeable). The paradox of ‘keeping-while-giving’ rests on the notion that one would keep certain things out of circulation, while exchanging other things. In other words, as is explained, “Possessions are given, yet not given. Some are kept within the same family for generations with retention, not movement, bestowing value” (1992:3-4).

Some things are easy to exchange; others are not. Things that are kept out of circulation are called “inalienable possessions,” which are “imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owner” or affective qualities of the giver’s “social and political identities,” as well as the “sacredness and ancestral identities” (1985:210-212). The owner of this inalienable possession keeps it from one generation to the next within the closed circle of family, descent group, or dynasty. The loss of such an inalienable possession is thought to diminish both the ‘social’ and ‘ancestral’ identities of the person who owns it and also those of the group to which the person belongs (1992:6).<sup>12</sup> The possession of inalienable objects not only generates power and authority but is also a distinctive symbol of difference: “each inalienable possession is subjectively unique, its ownership confirms difference rather than equivalence. Exchange does not produce a homogeneous totality, but rather is an arena where heterogeneity is determined” (1992:10). Most important is the ownership of the inalienable objects, which marks the difference between the exchanging parties and authenticates the authority of their owner in a way that is likely to affect all other transactions. Inalienable objects, as sources of power, remain objects of attraction to others, both allies and rivals. In brief, one’s social life, in its entirety, is centred on the possession of inalienable objects.

For Weiner, what matters is not that one give or returns certain gifts, but that one keeps certain (sacred) objects out of circulation. In principle, this attracts a series of exchanges and partners (allies and rivals). Weiner explicitly notes that “the object rather than the act of

<sup>11</sup> The reasons/motives explained here are in no way exhaustive but they can help us to understand the logic of the gift-exchange. Limits of space prevent us from exploring them in depth here.

<sup>12</sup> The inalienable possessions include land rights, material objects, mythic knowledge, shrouds, crowns, cloaks, bones, and much more. Weiner also explains that inalienable possessions are subject to “loss and decay” or “theft, physical decay, [and] the failure of memory” (1992:11,154; 1985:212).

reciprocity plays the dominant role” (1985:211). It is here that Weiner differs from other theorists of the gift, particularly Mauss, who regarded the idea of triple obligations as integral to reciprocity. In another instance, Weiner reaffirms her view, saying that “fame and power pervade all exchange events for giving and the status that ensures is measured by what has been kept” (1992:64). Having succinctly demonstrated the basic premise concerning the paradox of ‘keeping-while-giving,’ Weiner reaffirms in conclusion: “It is, then, not the hoary idea of a return gift that generates the thrust of exchange, but the radiating power of keeping inalienable possessions out of exchange” (1992:150). There is a stark difference between Weiner’s paradox of ‘keeping-while-giving’ and Mauss’s triple obligations. Mauss’s account clearly has more relevance and general applicability, though Weiner’s work is certainly relevant and applicable in certain specific contexts.

### 3.1 The Paradoxes of ‘Keeping-for-Giving’ and ‘Giving-for-Keeping’

Maurice Godelier identifies some discrepancies in Mauss’s account of the logic of gift-exchange. Based on his own observation of the practice of giving gifts and counter-gifts among the Baruya in New Guinea, Godelier maintains that there is in fact no “potlatch” and no acquisition of “power” in this exchange. On the contrary, Godelier finds that the chiefs (or “Big Men”) derive their power not from their wealth or access to women, but from their relations to sacred objects and possession of secret knowledge passed down from their ancestors. In his examination of the system of kinship relations, Godelier found Mauss’s account to be “reductive,” such that much was left unexplained or mutilated. Weiner’s book introduced him to the paradox of ‘keeping-while-giving,’ which, he states, partially dispels the “enigma” of gift-giving. His own interest in sacred objects led Godelier to have a closer look at the social phenomena of gift-exchange. In this context, he proposes his hypothesis: “there are some things which must not be given and which must not be sold either” (1999:8; see also 2002).<sup>13</sup> Having a task at hand, Godelier goes on to prove that his hypothesis points at a universal social phenomenon and an important foundation for society. He argues that “no society, no identity can survive over time and provide a foundation for the individuals or groups that make up a society if there are no fixed points, realities [the sacred objects] that are exempted (provisionally but lastingly) from the exchange of gifts or from trade” (p. 8). This latter claim directly challenges Mauss’s account of the logic of gift-exchange and its ethical interpretation of reciprocal obligation, which Mauss held to be at the foundation of human societies.

The focus of Godelier’s discussion shifts from a concern with “things that are given” to a concern with “things that are kept,” the latter of which demarcate a boundary between two domains: the sacred and the profane (secular), or the inalienable and the alienable. Godelier finds that the logic of gift-exchange, as found in the moral and economic spheres of archaic societies, does not fully capture the nature of social phenomena or include all of the basic components of human society. In his strong objections against both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, he argues that “the social cannot be reduced to the sum of all possible forms of exchange among humans and therefore cannot originate or be grounded solely in exchange, contract or the symbolic” (p. 35).<sup>14</sup> This already presupposes another domain, he thinks, which lies beyond the sphere of exchange and where certain things (sacred objects) must not be given in exchange but rather must be kept or withheld from exchange and reciprocity in order to be safely preserved. Godelier argues that the social sphere is founded not only upon things that are exchangeable (alienable) or things that are kept (inalienable), but rather on the “union” or “interdependence” of both of these things with respect to their difference and individuality. In this respect, in developing Weiner’s position, Godelier argues that the social realm is “not *keeping-while-giving*, but *keeping-for-giving* and *giving-for-keeping*.” The fact of the

<sup>13</sup> Henceforth, all references to this book will be cited by a page number given in the text.

<sup>14</sup> There is more to say concerning Godelier’s objection to Lévi-Strauss, but limitations of space prevent us from exploring the matter here.

complementarity of these two spheres makes clear the nature of the human agent as a “social being” and “the preconditions for any society” (p. 36, emphasis in original).

In his analysis of non-agonistic gifts and counter-gifts, Godelier offers a different solution to Mauss’s key problem. While claiming that Mauss’s two central questions are not rightly formulated, he restates the main question as follows: “*why is the debt created by a gift not cancelled or erased by an identical counter-gift?*” The reason for this, he argues, is that the “thing has been given without really being ‘alienated’ by the giver” (p. 42, emphasis in original). That is to say, the thing given has not really been separated or detached from the giver. The thing given carries with it the “identity” of the giver, which is inalienable from it. Hence, inalienability is tied to the giver’s “right to own” the thing given, just as alienability is tied to the “right to use” it. In this respect, Godelier argues, “To give... means to transfer without alienating, or to use the legal language of the West, to give means to cede the right of *use* without ceding actual ownership” (p. 43, emphasis added). Concerning Mauss’s second question: “*What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?*” Godelier claims that “there is, properly speaking, nothing ‘in’ the thing which creates an obligation to return the gift except the fact that the giver continues to be present in the gift and through it to bring pressure on the receiver, not to give it back, but to give in turn, to reciprocate” (p. 44). Godelier locates the “power” of the object given in the “relationship” which binds it to the giver. The presence of the giver (i.e. the right of ownership) in the thing given, which is inalienable, compels the recipient to give a gift again or give in turn.

Godelier holds that both sacred objects and secret knowledge are “*inalienable*” possessions, given neither in gift-exchange nor in market-exchange but wholly withheld from all exchange. The clans, to whom these inalienable possessions were passed on as gifts by their ancestors, are obliged to keep them. Thus the possession of sacred objects by particular clans in the Baruya political-religious system legitimizes the prevailing hierarchy. These sacred objects give the clans their own identity and hierarchically differentiate them from other clans. On this basis, Godelier argues that these sacred objects “constitute an essential part of each clan’s *identity*. They distinguish the clans, mark their differences, and these differences compose a hierarchy” (p. 120, emphasis in original).

As noted earlier, in the logic of gift-exchange the right of ownership is inalienable, while the right of use is alienable. In a similar way, Godelier argues for the alienability of sacred objects. The effects, fruits, or benefits of the power of the sacred objects can be shared with all the people of the Baruya, but the sacred objects themselves cannot be. The double principle applies here too, namely that “*the object is at once given and kept.*” What is kept is the inalienable sacred object and what is shared or given is the alienable benefit associated with this sacred object. Godelier writes, “[w]hile the Baruya clans are obliged to keep these sacred objects, they are also obliged to *share* their beneficial effects *with others*. ... What is alienated is not the object in their possession, it is the effects of the object” (p. 121, emphasis in original).

The sacred (or imaginary), which is more than unconscious structures of the mind (Lévi-Strauss), is regarded as a “universal phenomenon.” When a universal phenomenon appears in “social realities,” then all members of society are drawn to it and seek to produce and reproduce its attendant social order. Fully convinced of this, Godelier claims that “[t]he imaginary ... is clearly an essential condition for, and a pivotal point in, the construction of social reality” (p. 134). Having shown how the sacred or the imaginary are considered universal phenomena as well as social realities, Godelier affirms them as the foundation of human societies. He continues to argue that the same imaginary plays a significant role in shaping the social lives of all the Baruya. The sacred objects, he says, are “*the synthesis of the real and the imaginary which make up man’s social being*” (p. 138, emphasis in original). In differentiating himself from both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, Godelier makes the strong claim that “among the Baruya, even though the direct exchange of women among the lineages

affects the economy and morality – since it entails other gifts, exchanges of services, the sharing of goods – *society as a whole* is not founded on ‘an economy and a moral code based on gift-giving’” (p. 143, emphasis in original). As a direct objection to Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, this claim is a challenge to the universality of gift-giving. It is clear from the above discussion that, for Godelier, not only the logic of gift-exchange but also that of the sacred, which is inalienable, forms the foundation of society.

#### 4. Why ‘No Free Gifts’?

Our principal concern here is not to establish whether any gifts are truly free or not, but to address a certain misunderstanding concerning the nature of a free gift. Mary Douglas, in her “No free gifts,” does not in fact claim that there are no free gifts and neither do I. She does argue, however, that “There should not be any free gifts” (1990: vii).<sup>15</sup> This may lead one to ask: what is wrong with a free gift? At one point, Mauss himself notes that “[c]harity is still wounding for him who has accepted it,” but does not explain why or how this is so (p. 65). Equally for Douglas, the free gift “wounds,” yet nonetheless charity, as a voluntary and unrequited surrender of resources is regarded as a “virtue.” Why should there be no free gifts? The reason is that if we give free gifts, we not only intend to avoid the return gifts from the recipient but also decline to enter into relationship with the recipient of our gifts. This confirms Douglas’s claim: “Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties. Once given, the free gift entails no further claims from the recipient” (p. vii). The donor’s deliberate intention to avoid a return gift from the beneficiary disrupts the logic of gift-exchange and seizes up the cycle of gift-giving.

Douglas further argues, “A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction. The theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity” (pp. vii, x). The exchange of gifts involves establishing social relations between individual persons as well as groups in which both gift-giver and gift-receiver draw benefits from their relationship and share their cares and concerns to support one another in different ways. Briefly, solidarity arises in the context of a gift-exchange when “individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in market exchange” as a whole (p. xiv). Hence, when a gift-exchange fails to perform this basic function of establishing a social bond, contradictions will arise. For indeed, as Douglas claims, “Even the idea of a pure gift is a contradiction” (p. viii).

What is wrong with free gifts? The answer is that they do not enable reciprocity or create social bonds, which is essential in all true gift-exchange. Every gift, as a rule, has to be returned in order for the cycle of gift-exchanges to get underway. Moreover, the reciprocal exchange of gifts upholds the honour of both the gift-giver and gift-receiver. In this sense, Douglas argues that “each gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged” (p. viii). Free and pure gifts, which do not involve reciprocal exchanges, cannot require that persons or groups commit to each other and so keep the gift-exchange uninterrupted. Thus, Douglas claims, “There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions” (p. ix). It appears that free and pure gifts are insufficient to construct society as a whole; reciprocal exchanges are needed. As Douglas notes, “The cycling gift system is the society” (p. ix). A succinct statement of why there should be no free gifts can be found in what Douglas says in conclusion: “If we persist in thinking that gifts ought to be free and pure, we will always fail to recognize our own grand cycles of exchanges” (p. xv). Douglas’s critique of the altruistic act of giving free-gifts that entail no reciprocal relation does not deny the possibility of giving free gifts, but puts in question the intention or attitude behind the free gift.

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<sup>15</sup> Henceforth all references to this “Foreword” will be cited by a page number given in the text.

## 4.1 A Critique of Symbolic Gift Exchange

Pierre Bourdieu's critique of the practice of symbolic gift exchange – the economy of symbolic goods or capital – is based on his account of “the ideal of the true gift,” which he describes as a “perfectly gratuitous and gracious act performed without obligation or expectation, without reason or goal, for nothing” (2000:197). This conception of a gratuitous gift serves as the background against which a conception of symbolic capital is developed. The meaning of symbolic capital can be described as the accumulation of prestige, honor, power, authority, social rank or status, distinction, recognition and the like that are non-material in a given global social space (i.e. in the *field*) through the generous or disinterested act of giving gifts and counter-gifts (2011:112-121).<sup>16</sup> Viewed from this perspective, the practice of symbolic capital embodies “ambiguity.” In one respect, it denies “self-interest and egoistic calculation” and delights in an “exaltation of generosity – a gratuitous, unrequited gift”; in another, symbolic capital never wholly denies “the logic of exchange” (1997:231). This dual structure of symbolic capital is further explained as an “individual and collective self-deception” completely supported by the social structure. This is only possible through the “lapse of time” between the gift and the counter-gift. In other words, social agents continue to play the game of symbolically exchanging gifts as if they did not know the rule (2000:192).<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu argues that the significance of the interlude between a gift and a counter-gift affects the very nature of gift-exchange. Without such a time interval, he argues, the exchange of gifts would hardly be feasible. When a counter-gift is given immediately, it would imply almost a “refusal” of the gift. Moreover, the counter-gift must be “deferred and different,” otherwise the exactly identical gift or equivalent gift would amount to nearly an “insult” (2011:105). The interlude between the gift and counter-gift transforms the “two perfectly symmetrical acts,” making them “appear as unique and unrelated.” If there is a gratuitous or generous gift, then there is “risk.” Such a gift implies that “there will not be a return gift” and the risk factor creates a “suspense” or “uncertainty” in the time interval between gift and counter-gift. It is this time interval that differentiates a gift-exchange from “swapping” and “lending” and makes the donor experience the gift as purely gratuitous, as “a gift without reciprocity.” Moreover, the beneficiary also experiences his or her counter-gift as gratuitous and undetermined by the initial gift (2001:94).

According to Bourdieu, the social agent knows that his or her generous gift will be “recognized” not only by a counter-gift, but by rewards, honour and gratitude on behalf of the beneficiary. In addition to the counter-gift, all other forms of reward are held by Bourdieu to be forms of economic capital (2000:193). In this light, for Bourdieu, a purely gratuitous gift is impossible. The practice of gift-exchange cannot be regarded as a true gratuitous gift, because “it is not possible to reach an adequate understanding of the gift without leaving behind both the philosophy of mind which makes a conscious intention the principle of every action, and the economism which knows no other economy than that of rational calculation and interest reduced to economic interest” (2000:195). In fact, the practice of gift-exchange or the gift economy, denies the logic of “maximization of economic profit” or the “spirit of calculation and exclusive pursuit of material interest.” For Bourdieu, these deliberate refusals are objectively “inscribed” in the logic of the gift as well as in the dispositions of the social agents who play the social game of giving-gifts, as if they really did not know this game was being played (2000:195). Furthermore, he claims that the practice of gift economy is motivated by a desire to acquire symbolic capital, such as recognition, honour or nobility. In other words, the practice of gift-exchange transfigures economic capital into symbolic capital (2000:195). The logic of the gift and its actual practice is nothing but “a simple rational

<sup>16</sup> By contrast, the economic capital or the mercantile exchange is chiefly governed by the principle of self-interested calculation and profit maximization.

<sup>17</sup> The term “*common misconception*” means that “[n]o one is really aware of the logic of exchange, ...but no one fails to comply with the rule of the game, which is to act as if one did not know the rule” (2000:192).

investment strategy directed towards the accumulation of social [or symbolic] capital” (2000:197).

Bourdieu argues that the basis of one’s generous act of giving gifts is not “conscious intention” but rather a “*disposition* of habitus.”<sup>18-19</sup> We may ask here: does economism or a calculating disposition wholly compromise the generous disposition or anti-economic acts of gift-giving? If so, could gift-exchange still be powerful enough to create and sustain the social bond or even social cohesiveness between or among the agents who practice the symbolic exchange of gifts? For Bourdieu, the answer is no, it could not be powerful enough. He writes, “This ad hoc invention cannot really account for social cohesion, either in gift economies – where it is never based entirely upon the orchestration of habitus but always makes room for elementary forms of contract ... it is also based to a large extent on the orchestration of habitus” (2000:197).

Bourdieu maintains that “the initial act [of gift-giving] is an attack on the freedom of the one who receives it. It is threatening: it obligates one to reciprocate, and to reciprocate beyond the original gift; furthermore, it creates obligations, it is a way to possess, by creating people obliged to reciprocate” (2001:94). As a structural truth, he argues that this has been repressed both individually and collectively. This repression or denial of the truth of gift-exchanges, or of the exchange of gifts with exact equivalents without time interval, is an act of deception that can destroy the very exchange of gifts. When the exchange of gifts is reduced to the swapping or equivalent exchange of gifts, there is no difference between “an exchange of gifts and an act of credit.” Bourdieu also states that the first or initial act of giving gifts not only initiates or establishes communication between social agents but also involves “a kind intrusion or even a calling into question” (2000:199).

For Bourdieu, the economy of symbolic exchange is a “euphemism.” He regards the symbolic exchange of gifts as a “fiction” of disinterest that masks or conceals the truth of that the calculation of interest or maximization of prestige are the real motives. Elsewhere, Bourdieu argues that gift exchange presupposes a “misrecognition of the truth of the objective ‘mechanism’ of the exchange. [...] Gift exchange is one of the social games that cannot be played unless the players refuse to acknowledge the objective truth of the game” (2011:105). On this ground, he argues that in the economy of symbolic goods (i.e. the exchange of gifts), “either one leaves economic interest implicit, or, if one states it, it is through euphemisms, that is, in a language of denial” (2001:98).

Bourdieu refers to “the transfiguration of relations of domination and exploitation” as a practice of “symbolic alchemy” (2001:100). Gift-exchange between *equals* creates not only social relations but a kind of communion or solidarity, whereas gift-exchange between persons who are *unequal*, either actually or potentially, establishes a relation of “symbolic domination” based on communication, knowledge, and recognition. In the potlatch, giving is practiced beyond any possibility of return. However, even in “the most equal gift,” Bourdieu argues, “the virtuality of the effect of domination exists” (2001:100). Symbolic violence is never far away: “Symbolic violence is the violence which extorts submission, which is not perceived as such, based on ‘collective expectations’ or socially inculcated beliefs” (2001:103). Bourdieu speaks of the transmutation of “relations of domination and submission

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Maton defines Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* as “a property of actors (whether individuals, groups or institutions) that comprises a ‘structured and structuring structure.’ It is ‘structured’ by one’s past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is ‘structuring’ in that one’s habitus helps to shape one’s present and future practices. It is a ‘structure’ in that it is systematically ordered rather than random or unpatterned” (2014:50).

<sup>19</sup> Bourdieu explains, in brief, how one comes to have such a disposition. He says that “disposition is acquired either by being deliberately taught or through early and prolonged exposure to social worlds in which it is the undisputed law of behaviour” (2000:193).

into affective relations, the transformation of power into charisma or into the charm suited to evoke affective enchantment” (2001:102). These effects can be seen in even the most generous act, where acknowledging the debt implies a recognition of the person who acted generously. This recognition can be extended into a feeling of affection or love, as is often apparent in the relations between generations. In light of all this, true generosity or disinterestedness is impossible: “What is underlined through gift exchange, [is] a collective hypocrisy in and through which society pays homage to its dream of virtue and disinterestedness” (2000:201).

## 5. Can the ‘Ambivalence of Gift-Giving’ be Normative?

In light of the preceding investigations, one can pose a direct question about the normativity of the logic of the gift: how normative is this logic, particularly given its ambivalence? Does the agonistic gift have ethical elements? To what extent can we speak of ethical implications? The ambivalence of gift-giving may be an actual practical reality, but is it morally permissible? In a theoretical sense, the idea of ‘normativity’ is a very broad category, applicable to many fields. From the point of view of normative philosophy, it’s reasoning chiefly concerns how we assess human activity or behaviour on the basis of certain norms or values, with respect to whether it is reasonable or unreasonable, right or wrong, good or bad. In this light, we can ask the direct normative question: to what extent is the act or practice of giving gifts, even given its ambiguity, right or good? Stated differently: how normative is the agonistic gift, which is inscribed in logic of excessive rivalry and honour?

From a normative perspective, Vandeveldt notes that “it decidedly is not this kind of motivations or interactions that should be stimulated.” He does note, however, the capacity of the agonistic gift “to neutralize their violent potential and to canalize these energies towards socially desirable objectives” (2000:8). Nevertheless, one can argue that such an attempt to transform the natural propensity of aggressiveness into socially desirable goods itself seems violent in a certain respect; hence it is likely to be problematic for ethically autonomous human agents.

The agonistic logic of the gift is not, in its entirety, sheer violence or pure destruction or simply the playing of a game for its own sake. If this were so, it could not be desirable or warrantable on any ground. Jean-Luc Boilleau writes, “All this entails a number of consequences in the field of ‘behaviour’ – undoubtedly one cannot speak of ethics here” (2000:66). In contrast, from the human point of view, as discussed earlier, in the guise of a battle for nothing (sheer rivalry) one can also discern expressions of “solidarity” and “spontaneity” and feelings of “sympathy” among the people of archaic societies, however conscious or unconscious these may have been. All those qualities, as Boilleau maintains, seem to imply a “quasi-ethics” in the dynamics of gift exchange, and this ethics eventually becomes consciously expressive of desirable social or moral goods or objectives. The co-existence of two opposed elements in a single act is explained by Boilleau as follows: “in *agon* [rivalry] one notices within man a feeling of benevolence towards all human beings; a feeling that demonstrates the bond between human beings or the importance of human solidarity” (2000:67).<sup>20</sup> Added to this, Boilleau notes that the “triple exigence [of ‘equality, solidarity, and difference’] carries along an ‘insociable sociality’” (2000:68). These values (or this “quasi-ethics” or “insociable sociality”) are effective instruments in promoting a peaceful communality or social co-existence. Verhezen also refers to the normative implications of the gift. He explains that “a normative appeal for generosity, often leading to reciprocity, does not contradict the fact that some apparent generous gifts such as in the *potlatch* assume less benevolent intentions, confirming our belief that most gifts contain a ‘double truth’, even in its most normative call” (2009:54). Despite the ambiguity, paradoxes and ambivalence

<sup>20</sup> He also maintains that solidarity is not confined only to human beings but extends to “animal, vegetative and mineral appearances.”

inherent in generosity, solidarity and altruism, gift-giving has a normative appeal on its own, for the generous act of giving gifts can be fairly judged to be normative in itself, that is, judged to be reasonable, right and good on its own terms.<sup>21</sup>

As discussed at the start of the paper, ambivalence marks all our experience to some degree and is a part of our human condition (nature), to which we are inescapably tied and from which we can hardly escape. Karen Sykes, in discussing “moral reasoning,” notes that “living with moral ambiguity is the human condition, which is a feature of social life” (2009:18; see also 2015). This clearly suggests that a capacity to live with ambivalence, ambiguity and paradox is, to some extent, fundamental to the human condition and is a part of our everyday lives. This seems to suggest further that there is a kind of close relation between ambivalence and the human condition, so much so that perhaps we can say that being ambivalent is a natural part of our humanity.

Marcel Hénaff distinguishes between the order of “grace” and the order of “nature.” In the order of grace, there is an unconditional giving with no expectation of return, while in the order of nature, selfishness dominates and reciprocity abounds (2009:232). In terms of Hénaff’s distinction, the point I wish to make here is that from the human point of view, the act or practice of giving gifts is certainly grounded in the order of nature, not the order of grace. For selfishness and reciprocity tend to rule and ambivalence, ambiguity or paradoxes commonly mark the giving of gifts. In this sense, the idea of ambivalence appears to be quite natural in everyday life and the ambivalence of gift-giving cannot be entirely disentangled from it. If this is true, then the practice of giving-gifts, with all its ambivalence, certainly has a ‘value’ that needs to be normatively recognized. As Godelier notes, “the very duality and ambivalence involved in gift-giving create the ideal conditions for it to flourish in societies” (1999:12). Particularly, in creating and maintaining personal relations between individuals and groups, gift-giving can also promote human progress (in society). Thus, the act of giving-gifts is neither devoid of value nor of reason or reasonableness, but certainly entails a kind of rationality that is to be distinguished from economic or utilitarian rationality or, as C. A. Gregory puts it, from the claim that “rationality is a value” (2009:191). Max Weber distinguishes between *value rationality* (*wertrational*) and *instrumental rationality* (*zweckrational*), the former being “a conscious belief in the value for its own sake... independently of its prospects of success” (1978:24-25).<sup>22</sup> This fits the social phenomenon of gift-giving quite well: for it is valued for its own sake and not regarded as a means or instrument to pursue certain ends. The rationality of gift-giving focuses not only on maximizing one’s calculated interest, but also on sharing one’s wealth and property generously with others. This does not mean that there is no taint of self-interest, but only that self-interest is not the only factor in play.

For Mauss, the intermingling of contradictory motives not only reveals a “blend of reality” but also serves as an enduring principle of “life” and of “action.” In this respect, neither the egoistic nor the altruistic motive alone can provide a sufficient basis for moral or social life, but only a reasonable or balanced blend of both interested and disinterested, free and

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<sup>21</sup> Alain Caillé has shown from the ‘socio-historical’ perspective that gift-giving has a sufficient normative force (2002), while Christian Arnspenger, following the inspiration of Emmanuel Lévinas’s radical altruism (i.e. being responsible for the other), has argued that Maussian gift can hardly be regarded as a source of normativity (2002; see also 1999, June, 2000, 2000). I discuss Arnspenger in another context, however, his claim for ‘methodological altruism’ alone can hardly be an adequate motive to explain the social practice of gift-giving, which is ambivalent.

<sup>22</sup> He classifies the orientation to “social action” into four categories, namely, the “*instrumentally rational* (*zweckrational*), *value-rational* (*wertrational*), *affectual*, [and] *traditional*.” These classifications are in no way exhaustive and I do not discuss the issue further here. Emphasis in original.

obligatory reasons is likely to be ethically sound and desirable. It is always such a blend of opposed motives that can help us explain better the whole of human behaviour and social life. What Mauss has envisioned remains not only true but also has had a global significance up to today: namely, his call “to emerge from self, to give, freely and obligatorily” (p. 71). This can be ‘the way forward’ in promoting human cohesiveness and progress, which calls at once for a recognition of the normative significance of the ambivalence of gift-giving in a way that is both imperative and free. Such a moderate blend of reality is morally reasonable, socially desirable and practically appealing insofar as it offers principles for life and action, rather than a sheer quixotic ideology or deceptive illusion.

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