

The Gift as Sufficient Source of Normativity

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Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Marcel Gauchet explain that today the hold that the religious dimension has always exerted over human societies is, of very recent date but definitely, slackening; that it is becoming 'hollow' and ceases to inspire collective action, leaving henceforth wide open the question of knowing in which name we should attempt to take our destiny in our hands and base the norms of collective being. This question at once summons up another, implicitly contained in the latter: is every ethical norm (or moral norm, for we are not making a distinction between the two concepts here) ultimately religious in origin, as is most often supposed, or can one in fact conceive of sketching the outlines of a moral code that is immanent within the social relationship, a moral code that is sufficiently coherent and self-consistent to do without, at least in theory, a religious-type transcendence? Here, I should like to make a case for the second response by emphasizing that religion – whatever meaning one bestows on this notion, still undefined today – does not constitute the primary, irreducible social and historical fact that is most often supposed, but that it should itself be interpreted as the formulation of a more original and more universal formulation: the threefold obligation of giving, receiving, and repaying distinguished by Marcel Mauss in his famous *Essay on the Gift*. Of course, I shall not claim here to do more than sketch a few possible lines of argument. But even before formulating them, I must call to mind two prejudicial objections that my argument has encountered.

Two prejudicial objections

Basing the moral code on the reality of the social obligation to give, to which human beings have very clearly submitted from ancient societies to the present day, in short deducing the norm from practice, the values of events – this is what seems to be forbidden in relation to the two types of discourse which dominate the philosophical and/or sociological scene today. The first refers to the phenomenological tradition, and more specifically to Emmanuel Lévinas. We can note what Christian Arnsperger¹ has to say on this point: as an economist, he claims to represent methodological individualism but, as a philosopher, he makes the case for a methodological altruism inspired by Lévinas. Arnsperger tells us that Mauss's moral code is admirable – 'to leave oneself behind, to give, freely and obligatorily' – but, in opposition to Mauss's scheme, it cannot be sociologically based. The gift can only become effectively moral from the point where it opens itself ontologically to Lévinas-type altruism, itself clearly linked to a religious tradition.

More specifically, Ansperger puts forward three series of considerations against the Maussian sociological perspective:

(1) There is no intelligible relation, no continuity between the self-interested gift, agonistic and exhibitionist, of primitive peoples and the moral gift of modern men. One could not take as the foundation for the moral code the archaic practices of the agonistic gift ('To be . . . the most handsome, the luckiest, the strongest, and wealthiest – this is what is sought after',* wrote Mauss) that are clearly immoral to our eyes.

(2) The sociological concept is too holistic to make room for liberty and without liberty there can be no morality of the gift, for in any case there is no morality without liberty.

(3) As a result, it endorses anything including the most immoral practices. If the gift, interpreted sociologically, is what sustains the social relation by forming a bond, then both Nazi festivals and the Communist appeals for self-sacrifice in the people's cause should also be accorded value. After all, there, too, and even if it is in order to kill, one departs from the self.

On consideration, this criticism seems the perfect mirror image of another criticism, developed in 1997 by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour in the context of the sociology of sciences. They took *La Revue du MAUSS*, and through it Marcel Mauss, to task, not for failing to recognize the difference between the gift among primitive peoples and the gift among modern men but, on the contrary, for overestimating it.² To believe them, between 'them' and 'us', between primitive peoples and the modern people whom, moreover, we have never been, there is no palpable difference, no 'great divide'. There is not, on the one hand, the gift for them and 'capitalist calculation' for us. Everybody, archaic and modern, is equally capitalist and/or donor, *ad libitum*, according to time and circumstance. Everything is a case of 'formatting' of contingent alliances. As a result, the gift cannot be a source of normativity, neither the modern gift nor the gift between primitive peoples, since it extends into all eternity, outside all stable and systematic opposition between interest and disinterestedness, between market and non-market, or between monetary and non-monetary.³

In short, Ansperger, like Callon and Latour, suggests to us, that sociology – or what I should prefer to call the socio-historical perspective – is incapable of expressing any normative principle whatsoever. But Latour maintains that it is no more or less so than philosophy, ethics, and religion, while Ansperger refers us from sociology to philosophy. And, probably, beyond that to religion.

The general picture is clear. In opposition to Callon and Latour, I should like to maintain that, without lapsing into self-destructive relativism or historicism, we cannot avoid asking ourselves about the origin, nature, and degree of consistency of the values in the name of which we speak and act. This point calls for further refinement. Let us go no further than Latour. He is clearly not so naïve as to claim to save himself the trouble of normative questions. But he is over-ready and unduly hasty in putting off the task of bringing responses to bear on politics and the democratic debate.⁴ In sum, value judgements expressed democratically through the procedures of conflicting debate would be correct.

I have no objection to this formulation in theory, apart from the fact that it is truncated and incomplete (like, moreover, those of Rawls or Habermas, and for the same reasons). It sees only the formal and procedural dimension of things and of democracy. We would undoubtedly balk at a non-democratic normativity and there is no democracy without procedure and without debate. But debate on what? In which terms? We have still to define the type of substantial arguments and the causes which we believe should triumph in the democratic arena, or which we would like to see doing so. And they necessarily go beyond the purely procedural dimension to refer to profound anthropological and existential issues which have yet to be identified.

Conversely, in opposition to Christian Arnsperger, or more generally in opposition to the philosophical views and *a fortiori* in opposition to the religious perceptions of the normative question, it seems to me that we cannot reason from the perspective of a transcendence that is out of kilter with, and external to, the effective practice of individuals – whether it is a case of divine transcendence or the transcendence of eternal and universal Reason – but that we must, by contrast, isolate the characteristics of a normativity that is immanent in the social and historical being.

This can be summed up in a slogan: ‘neither historicism nor ontologism’. Between historicism and ontology, what we need is a concept of values which acknowledges their historicity but which does not reduce them to it and which makes evident an unvarying ethical core, beyond or beneath the diversity of societies, cultures and moral codes. It is precisely this core which Mauss sought in his *Essay on the Gift* and which he thought he had found when he spoke of the ‘bedrock of eternal morality’. If he was right, and I believe he was, then we should consider the various religious, ethical, and philosophical formulations as so many historic variations on one and the same universal theme, the theme of the gift. This line of research has hardly been explored, in fact. However, I believe that it is the most fruitful and the soundest in principle. But in order to risk tackling it, the way has to be cleared, some all-too-foreseeable doubts have to be removed and some ruts avoided. I should therefore like to pose the following question here: in which conditions can the ‘paradigm of the gift’ play the simultaneous role of compass and map, enabling us to find our bearings in those normative areas which we know to be littered with traps and pitfalls? Here, limiting myself to stating them in a shorthand format, I shall distinguish six points.⁵

The gift, the earliest society, and the threefold alliance

(1) What Mauss discovered, in stating a definite universality of the threefold obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate, is the law of what I shall call ‘the earliest society’, founded on alliance and the need for the personalization of social or cosmic actors. More precisely, the gift, the obligation to give, shaped the earliest society by presenting a threefold alliance: between the warriors who, by means of the agonistic gift (horizontal gift), swung from the register of war to that of peace, from mistrust to trust; between the generations, between the past and the future, by a vertical gift which is the gift of life; finally, between human beings and superior spiritual entities by a diagonal gift or, if you prefer, by the sacrifice instituted by religion. This law of the threefold alliance founded on a threefold

gift, the law of the earliest society, is none other than what psychoanalysts call the symbolic. It defines a primary core of eternal morality, its bedrock.

The moralization of the gift

(2) The great 'universalist' religions and, in their wake or parallel to them, the secular moralists such as Seneca can be considered the result of a threefold process of mutation affecting this first morality. There was simultaneous universalization, radicalization, and interiorization of the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate.⁶ Universalization, in that henceforth gifts had to be given outside the circle of those close to one and the immediate group. Radicalization, in that one had truly to give and not merely go through the motions, to give the very thing that was wanted and not just its symbol. Interiorization, in that gifts had to be given in order truly to give and not to show that one was giving. Not showing that one is giving is the best indicator of giving radically and universally. Whence the necessity for interiorization.

The second society and the third

(3) What prevents us from assessing accurately the significance of Mauss's discovery is that our society is clearly no longer the earliest society, even if certain characteristics of the latter are preserved on a much larger scale than has often been believed.⁷ Modernity set up a second society, no longer founded on submission to the personal obligation to give which is the obligation to personalize the partners in an alliance through the gift, but on submission to an impersonal Law, inflected as moral, juridical, political, or economic law, or as scientific law (the law of Nature), and so on. However, this second society itself is in the process of crumbling before our eyes to make more room every day for a third type of society, a third society, no longer the earliest society structured by symbolism, nor the second society governed by the Law, but a global society criss-crossed by universal virtualization, the virtual society.

Different gift régimes

(4) Both the second society and the third society clearly escape, as such, the register of symbolism specific to the earliest society. However, they are not strangers to the gift. On the one hand, they allow (and they must necessarily do so if they are not to disintegrate) large areas of primary sociality to remain, since they do not abolish the logic of interpersonal relations. On the other hand, they mobilize the spirit of the gift in their turn, but deployed on a different scale. In the second society, people no longer give to those close to them, to persons, but to impersonal entities (themselves often personalized, like the Nation, the proletariat, etc.), to the State, to the Law, to science, to efficiency, in short, to impersonal entities. The apotheosis of the gift in the second society is politics, humanism, and the spirit of democracy. In the third society which is emerging, when one gives, the underlying trend is to give on a global scale, to humanity, and with a view to bringing about a global society.

The three moralities

(5) The scene thus sketched out, we can now pose the central question: which moral system should prevail? That which is based on symbolism, that which invokes the Law, or that (still unknown and perhaps impossible) which is being forged in virtuality? Three camps can be differentiated here: the traditionalists intend to save what remains of the symbolic, of the old law of blood relations and alliance. The modernists, what remains of the universalist religious dimension and of the law of the State. The postmodernists (we will call them that) want by contrast to sweep aside all these old-fashioned ideas to be open to the wind of change and of the future, to the single moral code of the infinitely and indefinitely open world. You will have guessed that, for my part, I believe that we must grant the specific needs of the three levels of the gift, and of the three moral codes, without subconsciously excluding or fetishizing any of them. A rigid focus on symbolism produces, in the worst-case scenario, forms of fundamentalism or, in the less-worse case, the continued subordination of the feminine to the masculine which has become intolerable. The postmodern globalist perspective, conversely, leads to a moralizing 'rights-of-man-ism' which first of all opens the way for the universal penetration of the market and the destruction of the last remaining ethical regulations, with the catastrophic effects which we know so well. In its turn, a rigid focus on secular and republican modernity produces blindness, as much to the legitimacy of distinctive inherited specific characteristics as to the advent of a new pulse in the world.

The problem is not, therefore, suppressing one or two of the systems of morality in the name of a third, in opposition to fanatics of all kinds, but knowing how to link together and hierarchize all three. It is here that we have to enter into the detail of the paradigm of the gift and better disentangle its intrinsic ontological, psychological, and ethical implications.

Neither unconditional unconditionality nor transcendent transcendence

(6) Let us go back to the Maussian formula which was our starting-point, 'departing from the self, giving freely and obligatorily'. It refers to the two oppositions which structure the *Essay on the Gift*. The opposition first of all between obligation and liberty: the gift is compulsory, but the obligation which is laid upon the human subject is, in order to be human, to grant freedom. The opposition, moreover, between interest on one's own account (interestedness) and interest on behalf of another (disinterestedness): one must leave oneself behind and be open to alterity. To follow the logic of this dual opposition which regulates the social system of the gift, we see two conclusions emerge which are not perhaps entirely trivial:

(a) The social system based on the obligation to give, receive, and reciprocate asserts the hierarchical primacy of the value of liberty over obligation and of opening-up to the Other over closure on oneself. But, unlike a particular phenomenological tradition represented especially by Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida, and, firstly, Jean-Luc Marion, the sociological concept of the morality of the gift has no need to assert that the gift, to exist at all, should be expunged of all interest and all obligation, that it must, at root, be without intention. It is sufficient to state that it becomes open, by means of logical

construction and hypothesis, to the disproportionate impact of effects upon causes, to what has not happened and to the indeterminate.

(b) There is thus definitely transcendence in this sense in the system of the gift, which is by nature an open system. Open to alterity, to the future, to the past, and gradually to the cosmos. Similarly, and always naturally, debt inevitably enters into the gift (nobody is ever clear of debt) and so does sacrifice (one cannot give without giving something of oneself, one's goods, or one's time). But this transcendence, this debt or this sacrifice are immanent in the tangible gift of actual men and women, caught in distinctive historicities. To understand the morality of the gift, it is not necessary to write it in capital letters, take its concept for material substance, and dissolve it in a radical unconditionality, in a transcendent Transcendence, in Debt or Sacrifice. The religious dimension has made it possible to illuminate and confer greater restrictive authority on the morality of the gift. But it has also often perverted it by causing it to tip over into a sacrificial dimension. In any case, the morality of the gift, the moral code stemming from the gift, can be conceived and expressed outside the religious sphere. It remains to be seen whether it can be put to work effectively without and outside it. That is another question.

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Translated from the French by Juliet Vale

* M. Mauss (1990) *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London and New York, Routledge), p. 96.

Notes

1. See especially our recent exchange in (2000) *La Revue du MAUSS semestrielle*, 15 (Éthique et économie: l'impossible (re)mariage?), semester 1 (Paris, La Découverte): C. Arnspurger, Mauss et l'éthique du don: pour un altruisme méthodologique, pp. 99–119; A. Caillé, Don et altruisme: réponse à Ch. Arnspurger, pp. 120–126; C. Arnspurger, Réponse à A. Caillé, pp. 127–132.
2. Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (1997) 'Tu ne calculeras pas' ou comment symétriser le don et le capital, *La Revue du MAUSS semestrielle*, 9 (Comment peut-on être anticapitaliste?), semester 1 (Paris, La Découverte), pp. 45–70; A. Caillé, Brève réplique à M. Callon et B. Latour, *ibid.*, pp. 71–76.
3. This putting of oppositions into generalized perspective, standard in M. Mauss or Karl Polanyi, between interest and disinterestedness, or between monetary and non-monetary, is very widely used today. It lies at the heart of the works of Maurice Bloch, Jonathan Parry, or Viviana Zeliser.
4. See e.g. B. Latour (1999) *Politiques de la nature: pour faire entrer les sciences en démocratie* (Paris, La Découverte).
5. For further details, see A. Caillé (2000) *Anthropologie du don: le tiers paradigme* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer).
6. I owe this analysis to Camille Tarot (1993) Repères pour une brève histoire de la naissance de la grâce, *La Revue du MAUSS semestrielle*, 1 (Ce que donner veut dire: don et intérêt) (Paris, La Découverte), semester 1.
7. As is demonstrated in the book by Jacques T. Godbout (with A. Caillé) (1992) *L'esprit du don* (Paris, La Découverte) [*The World of the Gift* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press), 1998, paperback edition 2000].