

Is *Homo Donator* a *Homo Moralis*?

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Like many interested in the gift, I have to confess to having always experienced a certain attraction for methodological individualism. Through its way of approaching social actors, methodological individualism introduces the actor's concern: what are the sound principles which account for the behaviour of the actors that are observed? This is the question which individualism compels us constantly to ask. Admittedly, its response is almost always the same: self-interest. As R.H. Frank wrote:

Most [economists'] texts mention at the outset that our rational choice model takes peoples' tastes as given. They may be altruists, sadists, masochists; or they may be concerned solely with advancing their own material interests. But having said that, most texts then proceed to ignore all motives other than material self-interest.

(Frank, 1994, p. xxiii)

But at the outset, and in theory, other responses are possible. And, when we ask what are the sound reasons for giving, we assert that the interest response, while important, is not enough and we are led to seek other valid reasons. This search has led me to postulate a *homo donator*, who is the opposite of *homo oeconomicus*, not in the sense of claiming to replace him but in the sense of a supplement to account for what is in circulation among the members of a society (Godbout, 2000). This postulate seems to me to be similar to Arnspenger's (2000) proposition setting the concept of methodological altruism in opposition to that of methodological individualism.

The question posed by the present paper is the following: is *homo donator* a *homo moralis*? This theme of the relations between gift and morality or normativity can be tackled briefly by asking three questions:

Starting from the moral considerations of Marcel Mauss's *Essay on the Gift*, one asks whether the gift is necessary for morality.

Does this gift morality encompass the entire moral code; is it the sole foundation of the moral code?

Is the gift necessarily moral? Is every gift moral?

Moral considerations. There is a *homo donator*

In concluding his essay on the gift, Mauss was led to formulate 'moral conclusions'. This passage on moral considerations has been considered unjustified and unjustifiable by many commentators. And not without reason. For how, after stating at the start of a text

that the gift is nothing other than social deceit, can an author end by making it the 'bedrock', the moral foundation of every society? As Goux (2000: 283) wrote, 'you cannot jump so fast from potlatch to welfare payments'. Personally, I do not believe that Mauss based his moral considerations on the potlatch, even if it has to be recognized that Mauss himself created the ambiguity. Admittedly, he accorded great importance to the potlatch, but he presents it as an 'admittedly typical form, but developed and relatively *rare* [my emphasis], of total services' (*Essay*, p. 151). The core of Mauss's moral reflections on the gift does not stem from the potlatch but from the *hau** and from total services. It is on these concepts that Mauss bases his moral considerations and ends by asserting the importance and universality of this movement beyond the self, simultaneously free and compulsory, which constitutes the gift. He thus moves from the potlatch, the agonistic gift, the gift which reciprocates, and from the model of the archaic gift. This model cannot be a source of normativity. In this case, one encounters the normativity of self-interest and 'long-term' market equivalence, which is implicit in most anthropological literature on the gift with the concept of reciprocity. It is towards this that every gift system tends: in the long term, the accounts must balance.

In postulating this balance in the longer or shorter term, debt is sidestepped. The gift of the anthropologists (and in part the gift in Mauss) is without debt in the sense that the aim is always to settle the debt, as in the market. In postulating *homo donator*, we leave the model of reciprocity tending towards equilibrium and posit a being in debt, a debt which is not necessarily negative (I shall return to this in conclusion) and thus breaks with the current anthropological model of a market-type balance. *Homo donator* is thus the foundation of a morality, this morality which seeks departure from the self, as Mauss puts it, this mixture of obligation and freedom that is proper to all morality. But what morality are we talking about?

A morality of the spontaneous which breaks the rules

The morality of the gift is not self-evident. First, this movement beyond the self is partly spontaneous. However, the world of the spontaneous tends to be considered more as pre-moral. It is the sphere of the biological, the instinct, the reflex. And the instinctive does not fall within the province of morality, as everybody knows. For the gift to be a moral act, the spontaneous act has first in some way to be rehabilitated. The morality of the gift would then be close to that of Nietzsche:

... all thought which takes place consciously represents a degree of morality very inferior to that of the same thought if it had let itself be guided by its instincts.

(Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, second version, book 2, section 258)

For Nietzsche, the spontaneous is moral, exceptionally moral. Durkheim is not far from this position when he states:

For us to think that we ought to do it, it is not enough for it to speak imperatively; the acts which it orders must be able to touch and move us ... the philosopher Kant attempted to reduce the concept of good to the concept of duty. But that is an impossible reduction ... Morality must

seem pleasant to us . . . must speak to our heart and we must be able to achieve it even in a time [moment] of passion.

(1992, p. 615)

Durkheim is surely referring here to this movement beyond the self which is the foundation of the morality of the gift in Mauss. The social actors' thoughts about the gift are the same. They tell us that the gift which arises following a rational, well-thought-out decision is viewed as an inferior gift, indeed, even that it is not a 'true' gift. The morality of the gift is not a rational decision. In the model of instrumental rationality, the more important a decision the longer one should wait for intensive research into pertinent information before taking the decision (Elster: 1995, p. 140). The opposite happens with the gift, even for decisions as important as the gift of an organ.

The gift as departure from the self towards the Other perhaps leads to conceiving society in moral terms, but it is not therefore any kind of morality. It calls into question a specific morality. And especially – because of this spontaneous aspect – it forces one to distance oneself from externally imposed morality. The gift results in norms, of course, but by compelling us to look closely at the relationship to the norms, as it does not seem to fall within the usual categories. Conceiving morality from the starting-point of the gift stops one from falling into a moralist conception of morality, external to the subject. It is a different morality from the morality of duty. And all the more so because one of the rules of the gift, which is in part a consequence of this valorization of the spontaneous act, is precisely that of breaking the rules. A 'true gift', say the social actors, is done for the person, the other, 'because it's them', and not to obey a rule. But then how could it constitute the basis of what governs rules?

Is all morality included in the gift?

Can this moral code which is different from that of duty constitute the sole basis of morality? "Leaving the self behind: giving freely and compulsorily; there is no risk of being mistaken" is undoubtedly the *only* ethic which is valid in practice', wrote Alain Caillé following Mauss (*M.A.U.S.S. Revue semestrielle*, 15, 2000, p. 122). But once it has been established that the morality of the gift is distinct from that of duty, is there not also duty? Is there not also the person who does a thing, not out of self-interest nor from unreasonably possessive love (*aimance*) (Caillé, 2000), but because it is their duty, from moral obligation? *Homo donator* exists, but so does *homo moralis*. And he is different from *homo donator*. Not only is he different, but – and this complicates matters – *homo donator* and *homo moralis* are in tension, indeed, in opposition. It is a common situation. The morality of the gift is in opposition to the morality of duty every time we have to choose between a principle and a tie of friendship, for instance, which involves clientelism and the countless cases on the boundary between gift and corruption, often depending on the point of view and the social context.

We even encounter situations where, in the name of moral principles, society imposes contributions on its members, compelling them, for example, to contribute in the name of justice and of necessity (welfare payments). Is this still a gift? To answer this question, the case of organ donation seems illuminating to me. We know that France tends to make

it compulsory in the name of moral principles of solidarity. Moreover, analysis of the donors¹ demonstrates that the decision to donate organs taken by the close relatives of the person deceased is so difficult (the consequences are often traumatizing whatever the decision – Waissman 1996) that one can ask oneself whether it is not downright immoral to require donors to take such a decision. Admittedly, an act that is compulsory by law can still be viewed as a gift (Chaniel 2001). But then why is there so much concern that blood donation should remain free? If the extraction of blood were to become legally compulsory, would it still be considered as a gift? Such a concept of the gift corresponds neither to Mauss's definition (what of the freedom–compulsion mixture?), nor to that of the social actors, nor to the juridical definition of the gift: all these definitions assume that the gift is a voluntary act, in the minimal sense of not being legally imposed.

A certain morality thus appears to me to be in opposition to the very rules of the gift. This morality is necessary, especially because we have seen that one of the rules of the gift is specifically to oppose rules, to transgress them on account of this valorization of spontaneity and with the aim of increasing the value of the gift, its value as a tie. The gift does not therefore seem to be the sole foundation of morality and all the less so because the gift is not always moral, as will now be demonstrated.

Is *homo donator* necessarily moral? Is every gift moral?

Is the gift always good? Is it the gift which makes it possible to form an ethical judgement on behaviour? Is it in the gift that we are going to find the universal criterion of morality? I doubt it. If we return to the aspect most frequently mentioned in Mauss to designate the gift in his conclusion on morality, namely the fact that when one gives one 'leaves the self', it seems clear that the militant Nazi 'leaves himself', like the militant Communist or any generous individual. The self is gifted in all these cases. The moral criterion for judging these forms of behaviour seems external to the gift. But is the morality of duty, transcending the gift, then the only external criterion which makes it possible to pass universal judgement on the gift?

As an observer of the gift, I can only judge the gift from what we can call its 'internal criteria', in other words, from its effects on agents, by asking questions like: does the donor feel compelled by excessive social pressures or is he made so by a gift? Has the recipient been humiliated by a gift received, or the inability to repay it? The observer of the gift judges the gift according to the rules and norms of the gift, and not according to general moral obligation. For instance, Herod cut off the head of John the Baptist to give it to Salome as a present. According to the rules and norms of the gift, Herod made a very fine present, meeting the wish of the recipient without humiliating the other person, thus respecting the rules of a successful gift (wrapping included: 'on a platter', says the Bible). This is the type of question which one asks about the gift, just as one asks others about a successful market transaction. Thus prostitution can obey the law of supply and demand (or not), and from the point of view of the market that is fine and good. But one can also take into consideration the fact that it does not just obey these laws. One can similarly think that you should not cut off somebody's head to make a present of it even if from the gift perspective alone it is a magnificent present. For we do not believe that there is only

the gift, just as there is not only the market. And for this reason we think that Herod should not have followed the rules of the gift. We do not think this from the perspective of the gift but from a more general moral perspective. But these distinctions clearly cannot always be made so easily.

Reciprocity and the pure gift

To sum up thus far. The gift has an undeniable ethical dimension. There is an ethic of the gift in opposition to the ethic of the market.² The market knows nothing but the market value. The gift sets against it the value as a bond of what is circulating. What circulates in the world of the gift contains a value as a bond, a value which has been drained off by the market system in order to retain only the exchange value. This is the foundation of the ethic of the gift, this movement towards the Other dear to Mauss. But the gift is not the sole foundation of morality, because of its characteristics: spontaneity, contempt for rules which the gift impels one to transgress because it accords priority to the bond, the person, because another's interest is preferred not only to one's own interest but also to respect for rules. Moreover, the gift cannot apparently provide criteria to make a moral judgement on its own acts.

Traditionally, we place two concepts of the gift in opposition: the archaic gift, based on reciprocity, and the modern,³ unilateral, 'Christian', altruistic, unconditional; the 'pure' gift (Malinowski; see Schwimmer 1995 and Gagnon 1997). This opposition is in part artificial. Even the Christian gift is perhaps not so far-removed from the archaic gift as would be believed if it were not reduced to the pure gift, the pure act, but was defined as system, in the same way that the archaic gift is defined. It is only if the Christian gift is drastically reduced that it is found to be qualitatively different. As a system of circulation, it shares with the archaic gift the notion that everything comes from a higher force. Here we touch on the concept of grace, particularly important among Protestants.⁴ And if, furthermore, we take into account affects, emotions and feelings (which we also tend to remove from the concept of the pure gift), this movement beyond the self is rediscovered, as has been seen, and as the Italian theologian Sequeri has demonstrated, for whom the pure gift 'does not exist and cannot exist . . . At best it represents the myth of a narcissistic auto-confirmation of its own auto-sufficiency. It is the nihilist counter-figure of the gift, and not the pure ideal of its truth.'⁵

The most subtle way for modern persons to deny the gift is not rational choice theory and *homo oeconomicus*, which are directly opposed to it. It is this extraordinary bi-polar construction which constitutes the model of the archaic gift in opposition to the pure gift. The true gift, the concrete gift, disappears at the bottom of the yawning gulf between reciprocity and purity. To bring the gift back to the surface, this construction must be challenged. We must postulate the gift, of *homo donator* or of methodological altruism, and thus base the gift on something other than holism and individualism, and on something other than reciprocity or the pure gift.

But the problem is as follows: in making *homo donator* a moral subject is there not a risk of falling back into the pure gift and distancing ourselves from the gift as it exists? Thus Arnsperger states the existence of a 'constitutive moral competence' (p. 128) and bases his concept of methodological altruism on the thought of Lévinas. In this Lévinassian

world the bad gift no longer exists. The only 'true' gift is the good gift, Herod's present no longer exists, of course, but perhaps not that of the ordinary man either.

An ethic of debt?

One possible way out of this impasse is the concept of debt. Admittedly, the danger here is to imagine an eternally culpable individual. Nietzsche condemned this negative state of debt. If debt does not proceed from a gift made in the spirit of the gift, we must talk about the necessary settlement, which leads us to the model of balance and equivalence. This is why debt should originate in the gift. Then the idea of necessary settlement bound to the debt can be abandoned. The gift makes possible positive debt, and not only negative, it makes possible the debt of gratitude. 'Acknowledging one's debts as so many gifts received from others, is to pay tribute to all the deciding encounters which enable the subject to become aware . . . of what he could give in his turn' (Sarthou-Lajus, 1997 pp. 27–28; see also Godbout 2000). 'The debt of gratitude is the consequence and the expression of an affective debt which nobody wishes to be quit of' (Aquinas, Q 107). The concept of being in debt makes it possible to break the narcissistic autonomy of the subject proper to the pure gift (according to Sequeri), as the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous demonstrates (Godbout 2000). Debt makes it possible to assume a fundamental asymmetry which breaks with the model of reciprocity. Debt is perhaps even what makes it possible simultaneously to break with the equivalence model and to integrate duty. The state of positive debt can perhaps also make it possible to dispense with the morality of duty. For, spontaneously, the individual in this state will only make 'good' gifts. For those who know this state, the gift can perhaps constitute the sole foundation of morality, of the highest ethic, of those who live by the tenets of unreasonably possessive love (*aimance*), those who apply the 'Love and do what you will' of St Augustine. For them, Mauss correctly wrote: 'there is no other morality' (Mauss, p. 279).

But the majority do not (or only rarely) live exclusively in this state of positive debt, this state of gratitude generalized on the model of Francis of Assisi. For them, the gift is certainly the basis of a moral code, of an ethic. But the gift does not encompass the whole of morality. And the moral dimension of the gift does not encompass the whole of the gift. As spontaneous movement, the gift has its own rules. This is why it perpetually poses the problem of corruption: it pays no attention to certain universal laws that people provide themselves with in order to live harmoniously together. It even deliberately eludes the moral rule. The movement beyond the self which constitutes the gift is the motor of morality. But it needs norms, criteria external to itself, and it even often needs to be guided by the sentiment of duty. For the others, therefore, there will always be at least two sources of morality. If, as Durkheim wrote, 'the philosopher, Kant, was wrong to restore the idea of good to the idea of duty', would we be right in wanting to reduce the idea of morality to the idea of the gift?

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Notes

- * 'that spirit of the thing given': Godbout, 1998, p. 130. [Translator's note]
1. See Anne Marie Moulin's article (1995) La crise de la transplantation d'organes: à la recherche de la 'compatibilité' culturelle, *Diogenes* No. 172, ed. Françoise Héritier, *Questions de bioéthique* [The Ethical Crisis of Organ Transplants: In Search of Cultural Compatibility, *Diogenes* No. 172, 'Problems of Bioethics', pp. 73–92].
 2. For the market, the ethic is consumer preferences. However, the best that the gift can do according to these criteria is, with rare exceptions, to come close to the market and equal it. Thus the best anyone giving a present can do is buy what the recipient themselves would have bought with the same amount of money. But most of the time they will do less well, there will therefore be a loss of value, say the economists. They overlook the value of the bond (Waldfoegel 1993).
 3. Titmuss is known to have based his classic analysis of blood donation on this difference between the archaic gift and the modern gift. Like Mauss, he ends his work with an ethical appeal. But he bases it precisely on the difference between primitive gift and modern gift. For Titmuss, the two great differences between modern and primitive are the anonymity and thus the absence of personal bond, on the one hand, the lack of reciprocity on the other. Finally, Titmuss contrasts the close-knit community of Mauss, founded on the three instances, with what he calls the 'community of strangers'. At first sight, Titmuss entirely deconstructs Mauss, by applying his scheme to the modern gift of blood donation. But at second glance, this is not the case, as Silber shows (1995; 1996 *La Revue du M.A.U.S.S.* 8, 243–266). Why? Because Titmuss exploits exactly what in Mauss does not fall within the province of a morality of equivalence and reciprocity; or,

to put it differently, what in Mauss does not come under the usual model of the anthropological gift (1995, p. 228).

4. '... in the most active and passionate of those great worshippers which Christianity has produced again and again since Augustine ... the feeling of certainty that that grace is the sole product of an objective power, and not in the least to be attributed to personal worth. [With Protestant puritanism] [t]he powerful feeling of light-hearted assurance, in which the tremendous pressure of their sense of sin is released, apparently breaks over them with elemental force and destroys every possibility of the belief that this overpowering gift of grace could owe anything to their own co-operation or could be connected with achievements or qualities of their own faith or will'. Max Weber (1965) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd.), pp. 101–102.
5. 'il puro dono ... non esiste e non può esistere: né come relazione affettiva né come esperienza morale. Al massimo si dà come apparenza del *gadget* pubblicitario, o come mistica di un'autoconferma narcisistica (e ultimamente dispotica) della propria autosufficienza. È la controfigura nichilista del dono, non la purezza ideale della sua verità. L'essenza felice e drammatica del dono d'amore risiede proprio nel fatto che esso mette in gioco una relazione importante: in termini di dedizione e attesa. Introducendo l'orizzonte degli affetti, e attendendosi corrispondenza in quello stesso ordine, il dono d'amore azzarda e rischia ogni momento, senza mai potersi mettere definitivamente al riparo.' (Sequeri, 1999, pp. 152, 153, 154).