

Introduction

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According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a gift is “something, the possession of which is transferred to another without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent; a donation, present.” By definition, gifts are thus set apart from commercial exchange. An item or service can be sold, bartered, or gifted; the terms denote distinct forms of transactions (if the gift can even be called that). You cannot pay me to give you a gift.

I doubt that most people today, at least in the developed world, would contest this definition. Yet faced with just a few simple and practical questions, the very same people who would define a “gift” as an act of giving “without the expectation or receipt of an equivalent” would also immediately recognize the insufficiency of that answer. When I give a birthday “gift” to another adult, do I really not expect to receive a gift in return at some point? When I give a gift to a child, don’t I expect at least acknowledgment and gratitude? When I bring a bottle of wine or bouquet of flowers to a dinner to which I was invited, is it really a “gift,” or a token exchange that functions to reflect gratitude for the invitation? If I bring an unexpected gift to the same dinner – say, a package of lingerie – how would it be interpreted? Why do extravagant gifts between social unequals, particularly in the workplace, make us uncomfortable? When I donate money to a charity, must I receive no benefit, whether material or emotional, for it to count as a “gift”?

These very simple thought experiments highlight three complex characteristics of the gift. First, context matters. To understand the true nature of a gift, we must know the age, gender, status, and social class of both giver and receiver. The occasion matters as well: Is the gift given as part of a private family celebration, a

more formal cocktail party, or a ceremonial state visit by dignitaries? Indeed, the United States Department of State maintains a Protocol Gift Unit, which tracks such official gifts. To call the transfer of property a “gift” can also have very concrete ramifications in a court of law. I cannot later demand goods or services in exchange for money that I designated as a gift.

Second, the gift itself is not random. With rare exceptions, the actual gift or service is very carefully calibrated to its context. Societies not only have expectations for when and where gifts are to be made but also for the very thing (or range or class of things) to be given. My gift-giving is embedded in a much wider web of relationships, contexts, and social expectations. It is hardly the free and spontaneous act implied by the definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Finally, though, this very gap between our understanding of the “ideal” gift and real gift-giving practices is socially productive, even necessary. It enables us, for example, to carve out separate domestic and commercial spheres. Gifts are not commercial transactions. At the same time, by deliberately “misrecognizing” transactions as gifts we can blur these very spheres in socially and psychologically useful ways. Few, for example, would want to characterize their gifts to significant others as transactional, no matter what our expectations.

Thinkers in antiquity already recognized this tension between the gift as it “ought” to be and as it really is. In the first century CE, the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca composed a long and detailed essay that for all intents and purposes theorizes the gift. In this essay, *De beneficiis*, Seneca astutely observes that “people must be taught to give benefits freely, receive them freely, and return them freely. . . . Donors must be taught not to keep accounts; recipients must be taught that they owe even more than they have received” (1.4.3; Seneca 2011: 22). The essay, which is putatively addressed to the appropriately named Aebutius Liberalis, provided a guide to navigating the social minefield of gift-giving and exchange in Roman society. His discussion includes all of the issues mentioned above: the importance of the relative social statuses of donor and recipient; the nature of the gift itself; the intention behind the gift and how that intention is conveyed. According to Seneca:

We have to take account of the recipient’s social role. For some gifts are too small to come from important men; others are too big for the recipient. So compare the role of each and assess in that context the gift you plan to give, to see if it is too great or too small for the giver or whether, on the other hand, the prospective recipient might either turn up his nose at it or not be able to handle it. (2.15.3; Seneca 2011: 42)

Much of Seneca’s advice could in fact easily be transferred to modern social relations.

Seneca’s tract is probably the most complete and sustained reflection from antiquity on gift-giving, but it is far from being the only one. A couple of centuries after Seneca we find Jewish rabbis, in Palestine and Babylonia, debating about the definition of a gift in a legal context: if a gift is really a loan, is it a gift? One of their

fuller discussions of this issue occurs in the context of considering the requirement that on the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), each Jew must possess his own *lulav* (palm frond, with some branches from other vegetation). The rabbis illustrate the legal problem with a story:

Once, Rabban Gamaliel and Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah and Rabbi Akiva were coming in a boat and only Rabban Gamaliel had a lulav that he had bought for 1,000 *zuz* [a *zuz* is equivalent to a Roman dinar or a Greek drachma]. Rabban Gamaliel waved it and thus fulfilled his obligation, and he gave it to Rabbi Joshua as a gift. Rabbi Joshua waved it and fulfilled his obligation and then gave it as a gift to Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah waved it and fulfilled his obligation and gave it as a gift to Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva waved it and fulfilled his obligation and returned it to Rabban Gamaliel. (Babylonian Talmud, *Sukkah* 41b; my translation)

The Talmud, though, immediately recognizes the problem: “Why would [the story] read ‘returned it’? It means to teach incidentally. Thus we learn: A gift given on condition that it be returned is still called a ‘gift.’” Gifts are not always what they seem to be.

Of far more legal consequence are the gifts given in contemplation of death. For the rabbis, gifts of property that are meant to circumvent the statutory laws of inheritance, which are based on explicit biblical commands, were deeply troubling, even as they recognized their utility. The result was a fairly complex and self-conscious body of rabbinic law meant to balance “gifts” with “inheritance.” The problem was slightly different for Roman jurists, although they too self-consciously wrestled with this problem (Yaron 1960).

Even the theological appropriation of the notion of “gift” by early Christians grapples with the idealized “gift” in light of the implications of actual social practices. Hence Paul, in less uncertain terms than usual, appropriates the notion of the gift to describe Christ’s death:

But the free gift is not like the trespass [of Adam]. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:15–17; NRSV translation)

In this brief passage, Paul emphasizes no fewer than four times that Christ was a “gift” (*dōrea*). While he does not develop a full theology of the gift, Paul is here pointing toward the notion that God gave to humanity the gift of Christ and the grace or salvation that he brings. There is certainly an unresolved tension here: on

the one hand, Paul asserts that God gave Christ freely and expects nothing in return. On the other hand, Paul certainly thinks that we owe God for this gift and that God too expects our appreciation and piety in return (Crook 2004: 139–48). Paul is struggling with the nature of this gift.

Yet as Daniel Caner argues in his essay in this volume, there was an entire gift economy in late antiquity that was marked precisely by Christians giving gifts to God – whether through donations to ecclesiastical authorities or to the poor. Were these gifts in payment to God for goods already rendered or were they meant to put the donor in God’s (i.e., the church’s) favor? The theological problem that this presented to ecclesiastical authorities became acute enough that they developed an extensive terminology for sorting out which gifts were really not gifts at all, and which were.

Paul was certainly not the first or the only person in antiquity to link gifts to the nonvisible realm. The Hebrew Bible at times understands “sacrifices” as gifts to God. As in the case of the late-antique church, in practice these gifts went through the hands of religious experts. Similarly, Greeks typically brought offerings or votives to established temples to repay the gods for some benefit that had been given (e.g., Rouse 1902). Grave goods too are often understood as gifts to the dead spirits, although this is a notion that both Nicola Denzey Lewis and Karen Stern will challenge in this volume. Are these true “gifts,” meant neither to repay a prior service nor confer future benefits?

In antiquity, as today, political entities as well as individuals and families both gave and received gifts. A Hellenistic city, for example, might “give” a gift to another city or inscribe an honor for a generous citizen (e.g., Domingo Gygax in this volume). Cities frequently presented gifts to rulers of hostile armies. Or are they bribes, and if so, why are they frequently called “gifts”?

The gift, whether as an idealized notion, a set of social practices, or a discourse or theorization that seeks to reconcile the two, is thus hardly self-evident. Indeed, given the wide diversity of meanings and practices encompassed by the concept of the gift, does it make sense for scholars even to use the category as an analytical one?

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According to the French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), the answer to that question is clearly affirmative.

Mauss, the nephew of Émile Durkheim, began his teaching career in 1900 at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris, soon moving from a temporary position to the chair of “religions of uncivilized peoples” (Fournier 2006: 85–89). In 1930 he was also elected to a chair at the prestigious *Collège de France*. Both the breadth and the impact of Mauss’s intellectual contributions remain impressive. Mauss closely collaborated with his uncle, essentially establishing in France the new discipline of sociology. As indicated by the name of his chair, he developed an intense interest in “primitive” religion. While seeking (at times unsuccessfully) to steer clear of the common value judgment of his day that invidiously distinguished

between the lesser “primitive” and the higher “civilized” Europe, Mauss became interested in the “elemental” forms of religious life and phenomena. This in turn led him to ethnology, and while he himself had very limited experience in the field, he helped to establish the methodological standards for this emerging discipline. Mauss played a foundational role in the modern study of sociology, ethnology, anthropology, and religion.

In 1898, with his friend and collaborator Henri Hubert, Mauss published “Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice” in the second volume of *Année sociologique*, the founding journal of French sociology he edited with Durkheim (Hubert and Mauss 1898). In this essay, Hubert and Mauss sought to define “sacrifice” and expose its fundamental (or elemental) “grammar.” “Sacrifice,” they wrote, is a procedure that “consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed” (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 97). This definition gingerly straddles the line between the understanding current in his day that the purpose of sacrifice was a one-time exchange between humans and the divine and that it created an ongoing relationship. Moreover, Hubert and Mauss argued that sacrifice can be understood only within a social context: “The sacred things in relation to which sacrifice functions, are social things” (Hubert and Mauss 1964: 101). Sacrifice, like all religious phenomena, is embedded in the social; all are “social facts.”

Mauss was clearly preoccupied with these two interrelated issues of reciprocity and religion as a “social fact.” Having developed his ideas in a series of courses and lectures, Mauss published his “Essai sur le don” (later translated into English as *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*) in 1923–1924, again in the *Année sociologique*. This relatively thin essay grew out of and subsumed his work on sacrifice. According to Mauss, there is no “free” gift. All gifts are embedded in a set of social relationships and obligations. The obligations are “to give, to receive, to reciprocate” (Mauss 1990: 39). The purpose of the gift is thus to create group cohesion by establishing an ongoing cycle of gift-exchange. These practices constitute a “system of total services”:

First, it is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other. ... Moreover, what they exchange is not solely property and wealth, movable and immovable goods, and things economically useful. In particular, such exchanges are acts of politeness: banquets, rituals, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, and fairs, in which economic transaction is only one element, and in which the passing on of wealth is only one feature of a much more general and enduring contract. Finally, these total services and counterservices are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare. (Mauss 1990: 5)

Two other aspects of *The Gift* deserve note. First, much of Mauss’s theory was based on his reading of ethnographies of Polynesian and Melanesian societies and Northwest Native American tribes. From the former he developed the idea that

originally objects were thought to possess an animate soul, or *hau*, that related the thing back to its original owner: “To accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul” (Mauss 1990: 12). From the latter he was struck by the “potlatch,” in which material is extravagantly but ceremoniously transferred and even destroyed. The potlatch, Mauss argues, is a total social system in which gifts serve to create and reinforce social bonds, hierarchies, and identity.

Second, the essay suggestively contrasts “archaic” gift-exchange with the modern economy. The modern, monetized economy assumes a *homo oeconomicus*, a human whose calculations are always “constant, icy, utilitarian” (Mauss 1990: 76). Mauss’s socialist leanings come out in this section. The icy calculations of capitalism need to be tempered and reinserted back into the system of total services. Mauss strangely ends his essay with the story of King Arthur’s legendary Round Table. “Peoples, social classes, families, and individuals will be able to grow rich, and will only be happy when they have learnt to sit down, like the knights, around the common store of wealth” (Mauss 1990: 83).

Mauss’s essay has been the subject of intense study and criticism. Like most scholars of his time, he presupposes an evolutionary schema (from “archaic” to “civilized”) that has now long been outdated, even if he romantically valorizes the archaic. He was an astute reader of ethnographies, but he was still a reader; he had not actually seen the societies about which he writes. His lack of reference to Seneca is, at minimum, odd, considering the similarity of some of their formulations (Heim 2004: 33–35). More critically, his denial of the existence of a “free gift” has been extensively challenged (Parry 1986; Derrida 1992; Weiner 1992; Testart 1998; Laidlaw 2000).

But the value of his essay has largely endured, and many modern social theorists continue to build on his ideas (see the essays in Osteen 2002). Claude Lévi-Strauss, who attended some of Mauss’s courses, extended his ideas to demonstrate the importance of reciprocity to anthropological research. The notion that societies exchange (whether things or marriage partners) and create rules for individual exchange with the purpose of creating and reinforcing social bonds has become commonplace.

Classicists and other students of antiquity have also found Mauss’s ideas to be fruitful. Reciprocity is now seen as a major key to understanding Homer (Seaford 1994; Wagner-Hasel 2006). Scholars working on ancient social relations (MacMullen 1974; Peachin 2011), religion (e.g., Linders and Nordquist 1987; Parker 1998), and literature also regularly appeal to anthropological notions of reciprocity.

Today, Mauss’s essay *The Gift* is best appreciated less as a general theory than as providing a set of questions as well as a heuristic category through which we may observe antiquity from a distinctive perspective. Reconsidering Mauss’s essay requires that we step back from the general and broad notion of “reciprocity” to focus on the “gift.” Ancient cultures had words and concepts that we can rather unproblematically understand as gift. Mauss asks us to consider both how these cultures deployed these concepts in their wider social contexts and whether or how such a comparison of gift terminology and practices between ancient (and modern) societies might be enlightening.

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A conference was convened at Brown University on May 2–4, 2010, to consider how Mauss’s notion of the gift might be useful for examining issues in ancient studies. Primarily supported by the Ancient Studies program (now the Program in Early Cultures) at Brown, the main goal of the conference was to foster a cross-cultural, multidisciplinary conversation under the rubric of “the gift.” This volume contains most of the papers presented at that conference plus two other solicited essays (by David Konstan and Sarah Stroup). It is the first publication to deal broadly with using Mauss’s understanding of the gift for the study of the ancient Mediterranean.

These essays use Mauss “to think with,” and when read in dialogue with each other and Mauss, they bring into relief several overarching dimensions of how the gift, as discourse and practice, functioned throughout the ancient Mediterranean and West Asia. Here I would like to highlight four of those dimensions, which serve also as the organizational schema of this volume.

First, not all gifts were the same. In his opening essay, Marcel Hénaff helpfully develops a tripartite typology of the gift, arguing that Mauss focused primarily on only one of these types, the “ceremonial” gift that facilitates the mutual recognition between human communities. If Mauss overemphasized this type of gift, scholars today, especially of antiquity, perhaps overemphasize a second type that characterizes personal reciprocal gifts. The term “Mediterranean society” is sometimes used to broadly signal that a strict, almost mechanical reciprocity – *do ut des* (“I give so that you may give”), the idea that there was no free gift – was foundational in the Greek and Roman worlds (cf. Veyne 1976; Silber, this volume). Yet these essays show that this is a gross oversimplification. Greeks, Romans, Christians, Jews, and ancient Israelites all had a notion of the “free gift,” an offering given without expectation of repayment. Caner, for example, shows that Christians in late antiquity developed a highly complex and nuanced vocabulary for gift-giving, in fact, much like Seneca, theorizing the gift (cf. Wagner-Hasel; Gardner).

Second, the different notional categories of the gift are less important for what they tell us about actual gift-giving practices in antiquity than for the uses to which these ancient societies deployed them as discourse. Hellenistic cities, Marc Domingo Gygax argues, developed a discourse of gift-giving that was critical to maintaining the precarious balance between the polis and its wealthier members, who were expected to give “freely” to support municipal needs. Yet such a deployment of discourse was not limited to the public sphere. Zeba Crook demonstrates how the language of “gift” was integrally connected to that of “friendship,” and how both were manipulated in order to achieve larger social goals. Asymmetrical exchanges between social unequals, Crook argues, often mask the work that they do in reinforcing social hierarchies. Fictive friends give “fictive” gifts. Just as discourse about the gift played an important role in ordering the social relations between elite men, so too was this discourse (or at least its use by poets and

playwrights) deployed in the domain of love. Ovid, as Neil Coffee argues, plays with it in order to distinguish between a prostitute and a lover; only the former would insist on “gifts” for her sexual favors. A similarly playful deployment of this tension informed Terence’s play *The Eunuch*, and, as David Konstan argues, can be traced back to Aristotle.

Third, gift-giving is indeed best seen, as Mauss suggested, as a “total social fact” in antiquity. Gifts not only establish “recognition” between human groups (see Hénaff), they also play an important and highly calibrated role in creating and reinforcing social hierarchies within each community. Sarah Stroup demonstrates how elite Roman men chose to give books (among other things) to each other. The choice was hardly arbitrary; they conveyed cultural meanings that helped to reinforce class solidarity. Gifts to the dead, Nicola Denzey Lewis argues, served a similar function. Roman grave offerings were not “gifts” to the dead: they were meant to signal one’s social status to the living while reinforcing class identity and solidarity. A similar kind of signaling occurred in the Jewish cemeteries of Beth She’arim, according to Karen Stern. Here too, the “gifts” (used here to denote the apotropaic graffiti often found in these burial caves) were intended as signs for the living rather than the dead, in this case of filial devotion.

At the same time that gift-giving practices reinforced social classes, they also created potentially explosive tensions within and between them. In somewhat different ways, both the ancient Greeks and the rabbis recognized and attempted to address this issue. Solon, according to Beate Wagner-Hasel, legislated marriage gifts in order to dampen competition and to symbolically reinforce the idea that Athenians of all classes constituted a single community. Almost a millennium later, the rabbis wrestled with a similar problem: how can one reconcile a sense of a single community of “Israel” with their understanding that charity to the poor actually creates separate communities based on class? Gregg Gardner argues that to resolve this tension the rabbinic jurists sought at times to distinguish charity from gifts, classifying the former instead as a kind of fictive loan and thus preserving the illusion that the transaction was between equals.

Finally, gifts to the gods radically expanded the “total social fact” to include the realm of the divine. Anne Katrine Gudme argues that it is insufficient and too mechanistic to argue that biblical vows are simply attempts to gain favors from God. The true purpose of such vows to the biblical God was to help nurture a continuing and more mutually beneficial relationship between the parties. Gifts to the gods, though, frequently involve several parties. According to Ilana Silber, Peter Brown, building on Paul Veyne’s influential study of euergistic giving, argues that religious giving in late antiquity creates a new configuration, “with intricate relations of interpenetration, competition, and mutual distinction between charity to the poor, sacerdotal donations to religious elites and institutions, and solidary mutual help between members of the same religious communities.” While Caner’s essay explores this nexus for Christians, Galit Hasan-Rokem shows that a series of late-antique rabbinic tales transforms the gift of sacrifice to sacerdotal gifts, thus

helping to create a new rabbinic communal identity based on the study and interpretation of Scripture.

The essays in this volume, of course, can certainly be read profitably individually or in traditional disciplinary clusters (e.g., Coffee, Konstan, and Stroup on the Roman world; Gardner and Hasan-Rokem on rabbinic culture in late antiquity; Crook, Wagner-Hasel, and Domingo Gygax on the Greek world). By organizing the volume according to the dimensions above, however, we are attempting to facilitate more cross-cultural and disciplinary comparisons that foreground central analytical issues. The goal of such comparisons is not, following Mauss, to develop a “grammar” of gift-giving in the Mediterranean region throughout antiquity but to illustrate the heuristic usefulness of Mauss’s concept of the gift for illuminating aspects of the ancient world.

Obviously a consideration of the gift in antiquity is a vast topic. We attempted to limit the geographical and temporal range somewhat by focusing on the Mediterranean region from the first millennium BCE to the seventh century CE. We thus strove for broad representation while recognizing that this collection is far from comprehensive.

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After his strange invocation of King Arthur’s Round Table, Mauss ends his slim volume with a paragraph that points toward what he sees as the relevance of his study of “archaic societies” to modernity:

One can also see how this concrete study can lead not only to a science of customs, to a partial social science but even to moral conclusions, or rather, to adopt once more the old word, “civility,” or “civics,” as it is called nowadays. Studies of this kind indeed allow us to perceive, measure, and weigh up the various aesthetic, moral, religious, and economic motivations, the diverse material and demographic factors, the sum total of which are the basis of society and constitute our common life. (Mauss 1990: 83)

Mauss here, as earlier in his discussion of the transformation of the ancient economy to one based on commerce, money, and law, himself idealizes the archaic societies he examines. The writers in this volume show that Mauss underestimates the roles that hierarchy, symmetry, social context, and gender play in gift-giving. Mauss’s archaic societies are egalitarian in a way that no ancient society was – undoubtedly including the ones he read about and was purportedly describing. Political sympathies here appear to have played a role in Mauss’s analysis.

Mauss’s notion of the gift, as this volume and others have shown, has undeniable shortcomings. Yet, at the same time, the disparate essays collected here also show its remarkably enduring value. The gift, and a gift economy, is not a panacea to our modern social ills. But the gift – as object, discourse, and analytical concept – retains its power to generate new questions and research.

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