

La Logique du Don

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Translated from the French by Mariette Lemay

“...and when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality.”

– Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII

I was invited to talk to you about the logic of giving. The problem is that giving is not logical. At least, not according to the logic which prevails today – the instrumental rationality and self-interest which characterizes Neo-liberalism. Indeed, there is something a bit *irrational* in giving: it is the result of an emotional drive to let go; it requires active self-abandonment. A gift is the opposite of a contract in which one tries to anticipate everything. On the contrary, a gift liberates the other from all contractual obligations.

This, in fact, is one of the many ways of defining a gift: to give is to let things flow in a way which liberates the parties concerned from the contractual obligations of giving something in return. As Seneca wrote, a kind deed is a service rendered by someone who is under no obligation to do so.

Thus, to give is to take a risk. If we give, we may be taken advantage of, and we may be left with nothing. Yet human beings generally aspire to have as many possessions as possible. And in order to accomplish that, they must rely on themselves alone, seek only their own self-interest. Increasing the quantity of goods one possesses brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people, Bentham asserts. This is the logic that aspires to dominate the world, the neo-liberal logic which we find superbly illustrated in *The Economist* magazine every week. It is a logic which goes counter to that of the gift; a logic which is even opposed to the idea of giving; a logic which asserts that in order to control everything, we must produce everything; a logic of control of things.

This attitude is not new; it has deep roots. We usually date it back to Mandeville or Adam Smith, the first economic thinkers of the eighteenth century. But I wonder whether it is not the ultimate outcome of a much longer process, the seeds of which lie in the Neolithic period, when the human species started to produce instead of simply receiving what nature offered, the way anthropologists tell us the hunter-gatherers lived for tens of thousands of years before starting to cultivate their own vegetables and raise their own livestock.

I was recently struck by the fact that in the Bible – more precisely, in Genesis – there are no hunter-gatherers except Adam and Eve: a single generation, the first. They are happy. They are in Paradise. But the Fall condemns humanity to produce and to trust no one: neither one's brother nor Nature. Their children, Cain and Abel, will cultivate the land and raise animals. Already they no longer rely entirely on Nature's gifts. They are condemned to work. It is the foundation of the philosophy of production and control. There is a direct connection and a similar logic between the first farmers and animal breeders (Cain and Abel) and the lawsuits the President of Monsanto has brought today against a farmer in

Western Canada, and against a small enterprise from the state of Maine. Monsanto tells us: "There are no more gifts from Nature; even the seeds must be produced and bought from us each year!" The fact that these seeds are sterile arises from the principle that we must not trust in Nature's gifts. On the contrary, we must control it, and produce ourselves what we need; gifts must be forbidden since we are never better served than by ourselves – and by Monsanto! Soon, human life itself will no longer be a gift. It too will be produced in a laboratory, in vitro, according to the parents' specifications. They have become baby buyers.

The world of the gift is being attacked in a way that is unprecedented in human history. We are witnessing the ultimate effort, the last stage of an eradication of the gift, which will give us complete control. We will produce everything, nothing will be given, and it will be the triumph of *homo economicus*.

But a gift makes sense. Homo Donator makes sense.

The world of the gift is still alive, as this conference demonstrates. But is it a negligible phenomenon? Exceptional? I think not. After ten years of reflection on the gift, I have come to think that we are as apt to give as to receive, and that we often receive in order to give. And that is what we do, even if the market economy or the dominant value system tells us otherwise. It tells us that we are made to acquire, buy, accumulate, consume – that is, to pay and destroy. Why must we be made to believe that? Because the market has an absolute need to constantly increase the quantity of things produced, and its greatest fear, since the beginning, is that it will run out of consumers.

The power of the principle of reciprocity

One way to illustrate the logic of giving, which I call "the lure of the gift," in contrast to the "lure of gain," is to show the power of reciprocity. What is reciprocity? It is the tendency to give something back when we have received a gift. Receiving something incites in the recipient a desire to give something back, rather than say, "Good deal!", as the theory of self-interest would dictate. A gift carries within it the impulse for the recipient to give something in return. That is the principle of reciprocity.

This principle is very important. It is a fundamental social strength. The norm of reciprocity is as strong as the incest taboo, wrote Gouldner, as present today in western society as in exotic societies.

But wait! Reciprocity can be understood in different ways, some far removed from the concept of the gift, such as when reciprocity is seen as a long-term symmetrical structure of equivalence between what is given and what is "returned." I give something and I receive its equivalent. When reciprocity contains this idea of quantitative equilibrium between what circulates in one direction and back in the other, it is far from the idea of the gift. It is at the limit, indeed, almost foreign to the idea of a gift. It proceeds from another paradigm, that of symmetry.

At the philosophical level, we are faced with a problem far more general than that of a gift, a problem which Lévinas defined as the impossibility of thinking asymmetry, and the tendency to reduce it to symmetry. "The difficulty of thinking asymmetry without reducing it to symmetry arises from the tendency within the tradition of philosophy, which began with Parmenides, to impose unity on multiplicity."² (We could talk also of an obsession with the circle, the circular model according to Koestler.) Shapiro quotes Lévinas: "To the myth of

Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and even forbids his servants to bring back his son to the point of departure.” It is the difficulty of thinking excess. “There are dominant forms of thought that force asymmetry into symmetry, desire into need, otherness into the same, the gift into exchange.”

This sort of equilibrium is not what giving is about. A gift never reaches equilibrium at a certain point X. Equilibrium defines the end of a gift and the passage to another type of relationship, or the end of that relationship. Equilibrium means the end of a gift, as we realized in the course of our investigations. It is not difficult to understand. We all know that if my new neighbour comes to borrow some sugar from me one day and comes back the following day to give me back the same quantity, there is good reason to think that he does not want to begin a relationship with me, that he prefers to “keep his distance.”

A gift is a system of debts which, unlike an economic debt, can be positive or negative. “...the ‘balance of debt’ must never be brought into equilibrium, for a perfect level of distributive justice is typical of the economic rather than the social exchange relationship.” The end of the debt is the end of the gift.

What I understand here by reciprocity, then, is not a matter of equivalence between things circulating, nor is it the search for such equivalence between partners (we talk of the direction and not only of what is circulating). It is the drive that inspires the one who receives to give something back, and not simply in return, since this term implies a notion of equivalence, as when we return a borrowed object, either to the giver or to a third person.

Understood in that way, reciprocity is far more significant, and it has been pondered by many authors. It is the starting point of Marcel Mauss’s essay on the gift: what is the drive which inspires us to give when we have received? Mauss analyzed the power of the law which impels the other to give, especially in archaic societies. But the power of the reciprocity principle stretches far beyond the agonistic gift described by ethnologists. We observe its presence in the type of gift where we least expect to find it: the gift defined *a priori* by our society as unilateral – and therefore, non-reciprocal – the gift to strangers as in philanthropy, humanitarian giving, etc. Here are a few illustrations of the more extreme cases.

Organ Donation

This phenomenon of unilateral giving is seen in people who have undergone an organ transplant. The most noteworthy aspect in a case like this is that the desire to give something back after receiving such an important gift – quite literally a gift of life in the case of a heart transplant – is not directed towards those who made that gift possible (the family of the donor), but towards other people who have been through the same experience. Organ transplant recipients assert that they are eternally indebted to the donor, but they wish to give to someone other than the donor’s family.

Emergency Aid

At the time of the ice storm in Montreal, one of the regions that provided the most help was the Saguenay. When asked why, citizens responded that when they were victims of severe flooding some years earlier they had received a lot of help from people in Montreal, and today they were happy to provide help in return.

An even more spectacular case of this kind of giving is reported by Cialdini. In 1985, the Red Cross of Ethiopia (perhaps the poorest country on earth at the time) sent a cheque for \$5000 to Mexico to help the victims of a terrible earthquake. The reason they gave was that in 1935, Mexico had helped Ethiopia when it had been invaded by the Italian Fascists.

Philanthropy

In the last few years, many philanthropic organizations have made a habit of adding a small, symbolic gift to accompany their request for a donation. It was noticed that this gesture considerably increased the number of donations made. For example, the American Disabled Veterans Organization doubled its number of donors by sending, along with its request, self-adhesive labels bearing the name and address of the eventual donor. "The American Disabled Veterans organization reports...that when the mailing includes an unsolicited gift (...individualized address labels), the success rate nearly doubles to [from 18 percent to] 35 percent".⁸

This case powerfully illustrates the fact that the reciprocity I referred to has little to do with equivalence. It would be ridiculous to compare the monetary value of the organization's purely symbolic "gift" with the gift of the donor. Nonetheless, it expresses in a spectacular manner the presence, at the very heart of what we usually regard as a unilateral (and therefore non-reciprocal) gift, of the drive that urges us to give when we have received.

The power of this principle can even be diverted, so to speak, to compel the other to give. This phenomenon can be observed in all types of societies, both archaic and modern. Cialdini observed an occurrence some years ago at the Toronto airport. He noticed that Krishna disciples were handing out roses to passengers, telling those who refused them: "Please take it. It's a gift. It's for you". The passengers felt obliged to accept the rose and to give some money in return, even if most threw the flower in the first wastebasket they came across (where it was recovered by the Krishna devotee to be recycled back in the gift cycle). The recipients' attitude here clearly shows the strength of the principle of reciprocity, which applies even to an unsolicited gift, whether in a primitive society or in a modern airport filled with businesspeople we may justifiably assume to be imbued with "business sense."

No friends (or philia) in business

Clearly, even within the business world – a world ruled by self-interest alone, according to economists – the drive to give is strong, and sometimes even stronger than the drive towards self-interest.

The importance of the gift has indeed been observed even among businesspeople – not only in the field of philanthropy, but also in business relations, where it is said that there are no friends. This was brought to light in the results of the following research, in which a comparison was made between the effectiveness of the gift and of an ordinary commercial contract motivated by self-interest. An identical questionnaire was sent to two different groups of people. In the first case, the request for a response was accompanied by a cheque for five dollars, leaving people free to respond or not while keeping the money. In the other, the same request was made, but this time it was accompanied by a signed promise that a cheque for fifty dollars would be sent to them if they answered and returned the questionnaire. It was found that the five-dollar gift elicited twice the response as the promise of fifty dollars, which was perceived by the recipients as a contract! The lure of the gift here was stronger than the lure of the gain.

As all these examples illustrate, the motivating force of these invitations cannot be explained by self-interest, for we gain nothing by giving something in return. It is not really rational – yet not irrational either. In fact, it is perfectly reasonable, since it puts an end to war, as Mauss has demonstrated.⁹

I think I have demonstrated so far that the postulate of self-interest is limited and that the lure of the gift is not a negligible phenomenon. Indeed, the gift is at the very heart of the new economy which benefits from it, as the success of some enterprises – among them the L’Agora Encyclopedia, which is offered free of charge – has proven. All the more so (and this is what crowns it all for those who defend the self-interest theory) because if we were to carry the analysis further, we would realize that a gift usually pays only if we seek nothing in return: no gain, no end, and no profit.

This is the sort of paradox which makes the postulate of self-interest powerless. I came across this paradox again while studying the gift in the business world. Articles in business magazines hold that gift-giving is profitable – but then conclude that it must not be done with that end in mind! The gift that is seen as not profiting the giver (for example, the gift given at the end of a contract, which, incidentally, is recommended in magazines) is important in business relations.

Instrumental or not, the gift’s ambiguity remains. But one thing we can be sure of, which strongly invalidates the theory of self-interest, is this: we can miss out on some excellent business deals when we are motivated solely by self-interest. So much so that we can conclude with R. H. Frank that “the rationalist’s problem, which the self-interest model repeatedly overlooks, is that he (the pure rationalist) tends to be excluded from many profitable exchanges.”

The idea that giving is part of our nature may even have a biological foundation. In an article published in 2002, researchers from Emory University in Atlanta reported the results of a recent study which demonstrated that giving brings biological pleasure! In a game in which prisoners were given the choice of playing in a selfish manner or cooperating with others, researchers used the most advanced nuclear magnetic resonance techniques to observe what was happening in the players’ brains while they were playing. To their great surprise, they discovered that altruistic behaviour activates the same regions in the brain as does cocaine, chocolate, etc. They concluded from this that it is in our nature to cooperate – that “we are wired to cooperate.”

To receive life

A gift is thus an elementary force. But where does it come from? Partly from the fact that everything in our existence starts with a gift: the gift of birth, the gift of life. Life is not (at least not yet!) produced, it cannot be bought. It is given, or more precisely, transmitted. And for several years more, we continue to receive. All other gifts are a repetition of this gift of life, and we transmit, in our turn, what we have received. Even when it is our turn to give life, we feel we are transmitting something. To give is to transmit, thus with the first gift we make we are already giving back, for only God can initiate a gift.

This is why, when we give, we undergo a dual experience: one that is very personal, but that is accompanied by a feeling that the gift we give comes from somewhere else. It’s what we feel when we give birth. It is also what an artist feels. He does not know where the inspiration, the gift, comes from; he does not “deserve” it. He works hard, of course, but

something is happening which is out of his control. He enters a different state. While being entirely himself, he surrenders, lets go, and suddenly everything comes flooding in. It's a gift.

Beware: Gift!

This force is neither trivial nor marginal. It is very significant, and it can also be very dangerous. It can be manipulated. We have seen how people force the hand of the recipient in order to create a debt. We cannot talk about the gift without mentioning its hazards. Liberal economists are suspicious of the gift's force, and while they acknowledge it, they think we should avoid it in favour of the contract, which liberates us from that force. They see the gift as a debt that must be paid off in order to be free – and believe that right frees the recipient from the debt. This is a great modern victory – the outcome of a bourgeois revolution based on the valorization of the useful, and on preferences. That is why we love the market and the endless variety of goods it offers to those who can afford them.

In fact, not only is the gift not unproblematic: it is also the most difficult and risky way of circulating things among ourselves. It is difficult for the donor, who can be taken in, but most of all, it is difficult for the recipient, and for several reasons. The first reason follows from what I have just said. For if there is such a thing as a drive to give when we have received, a major problem arises if the recipient feels incapable of giving something in return, or if the donor transmits such a message with the gift. A gift always transmits something – a message, a meaning. It is not neutral like the market, or even the state. Unlike other forms of circulation, the gift carries, among other things, a message about the donor's identity and the image he has of the recipient. Think, for example, of the difficulty of choosing a gift. A gift is always a gift of oneself, and is often described as such. "That vase," said one heiress, "it's my aunt."

Consequently, a gift affects one's identity, either positively or negatively. It can strengthen the recipient's identity, or it can weaken, even destroy, that identity if the donor transmits a negative message with his gift – such as the message that the recipient has nothing to give, is incapable of giving anything. The relationship of the West with the colonies and with the Third World is a sad illustration of this today. "Even more than the market, it is the gifts not returned that lead the societies we dominate to identify with the West, and thus to lose their soul," writes economist Serge Latouche. The gift transmits the message that what they have has no value. It says: "You have nothing to give us except folklore."

The *message* is more important than the *fact* of giving something in return or not. It is perfectly possible not to return a gift without it becoming a problem. For example, a worker deplores the harmful consequences that food donations have in Montreal, making a distinction between emergency aid and the long-term gift. "Emergency aid is very important," he writes. "It is the long-term gift we must fight against. For the more the gift settles in over a long period of time and becomes, in a way, institutionalized, the more risk there is that the people we help will come to perceive it as a confirmation of their own personal inadequacy, incompetence even..." (Lachapelle, *Le Devoir*, 9 novembre 1999). The recipients come to "perceive food aid as a right," which is very positive in a sense.

Why does the author accord so much importance to the distinction between emergency aid and the that which "settles in over a long period of time"? Emergency aid is as unilateral as the other, so that's not the pertinent distinction; the distinction lies in the underlying spirit, in the perversion of the gift which takes place when a gift defines or confirms another person

as incapable of giving. The unilateral gift is negative when it makes the recipient feel that he cannot give, cannot contribute.

Some unilateral gifts have this sense, while others do not. It is the difference between giving someone fish and showing that person how to fish, to use a well-known aphorism. In the latter case we trust the other, in his capacity to give, to contribute. The author believes that emergency aid relies too much on that capacity. Though it is as unilateral as any other gift to strangers, it does not affect the recipient's capacity because his need to receive is defined as temporary and circumstantial, and somehow unconnected to who he is. The recipient is not perceived as someone who is permanently incapable of giving. The aid does not alter his identity; just the opposite, in fact. The problem is therefore not that the gift is unilateral; rather, it lies in the way the recipient is perceived, in the meaning that the partners attribute to the gift.

How can we avoid the negative, destructive dimension for the recipient? There are several solutions available, not all of equal value:

1. We can change a gift into a right. That is, so to speak, the speciality of the state, and often constitutes progress.
2. The donor may feel that he receives gratification from the very fact of giving pleasure, of giving relief; consequently, he may feel that the recipient does not have to respond to his gift. This gratification can take many forms. At one time the emphasis was on easing one's conscience. Today we place more importance on the pleasure of giving. At the end of a talk on the subject given to voluntary workers, a man grabbed hold of the microphone and said to me: "I don't know why you're talking about gifts. When I do voluntary work it's not a gift; I do it for my own pleasure." In so doing, he gave the recipient a double gift: the service he was offering, and an exemption from the need to returning the favour (something he could not in any case do) – indeed, from even feeling the need to give something back.

Is this pleasure a form of reward? Yes, of course, but what must be noted is that this reward does not come from the recipient. This is essentially what distinguishes such a gift, which is no longer associated with a response and thus loses its agonistic dimension. And this gratuitousness can consequently make the gift acceptable to the recipient. Whether given out of a sense of duty or for the pleasure it brings, the important thing is, paradoxically, to expect nothing back from the recipient, since he can't play the reciprocity game.

3. The role of intermediaries. Most of the time, gifts to unknown parties can circulate in a positive manner thanks to the presence of intermediaries. Let's not forget that they are the first recipients, and that their status is important to the donors, who often expect something in return from them. As the ones who solicited the gift, they are the ones who can, so to speak, absorb the negative dimension of the unilateral gift and thus make it acceptable to those for whom it is intended. So much so that, thanks to these intermediaries, the recipient may sometimes transform the gift into something that is owed him.
4. We can give it a positive meaning. These are all ways of lessening the potential negative aspects of the gift. But what is still better is for the recipient to be perceived

as a giver and to be able to give. There are different ways of achieving this, and the mediators can play an important role here.

Thus, a placement agency for the blind claims it is working in a spirit of efficiency, of added value for businesses, not providing charity to the blind. The blind are very happy with this approach, which may seem surprising at first, since the agency claims to work for the businesses rather than for the blind. "You have no idea how much a handicapped person changes the atmosphere in a company. It's a real plus," the director of the agency told me. We insist only on his usefulness, on what he gives, and not on what he receives from us. But sight-impaired people are satisfied because we give them what they are most deprived of: the possibility of giving. No longer seen as recipients in need of help, they are seen as useful members of society, as a resource. It is often as utilitarians that we give best. The meta-intention to help people with disability is obviously present, but we don't talk about it. The unspoken aspect of the gift takes all sorts of detours. The last issue of "L'Agora" (vol. 10, no. 2, in particular the articles by Al Etmanski and Vickie Cammack) and this conference provide many extraordinary examples of this approach.

This concurs with Abbé Pierre's approach. He tells us that the Emmaüs movement was born when an ex-prisoner who wanted to commit suicide came to ask him for help. Abbé Pierre replied: " 'First come with me to help this family find a place to live; we can talk tomorrow.' Without thinking about it, with no particular design in mind, I did the very opposite of charity, and that is how Emmaüs was born."

5. The reward can also be in the relationship itself, in the value of that relationship. This reward comes from the recipient, even if that person gives nothing useful. Thus, a person receiving help from a volunteer worker told us: "He likes to come and see me. I know it." Thus the pleasure of receiving is ascribed to the donor by the recipient himself, which is another way of avoiding entering into the game of reciprocating when this is not possible.
6. Finally, it can be achieved through solidarity. Solidarity can also contribute to lessening the dangers a gift entails. It does not destroy the other's identity, as the sense of solidarity gives the recipient the following message: "I give to you because we are alike, and being alike, we can't be sure that it will not be my turn one day to need you. You are going through a bad period now, but it could also happen to me. Giving something in return is possible because I know you would do the same for me if the situation were reversed." And we have seen how realistic this vision can be, and how long the recipient's memory can be, in the examples of Ethiopia and, to a lesser extent, the [Quebec] ice storm. In emergency aid, especially in the case of a catastrophe, the sense of solidarity neutralizes the negative effects of the gift.

Conclusion

What would be lost if the *homo economicus* model pursued its conquest of the planet with no resistance, and if the desire for goods became more important than the desire for relationships? We would lose what keeps us together, what nourishes us in every sense of the word: *philia*, friendship, the value of relationships for their own sake, not functional, not rational, not logical. If we lost the gift, we would no longer experience the sense of being overtaken by what comes our way.

I end this presentation as I started it, with Aristotle, who wondered why it was that the person who gives feels more loving towards the person who receives than the reverse, which is what we would rationally expect. “Benefactors are thought to love those they have benefited, more than those who have been well treated love those that have treated them well, and this is discussed as though it were paradoxical.” It is this paradox that we have endeavoured to discuss here.

The idea of the gift as a lure, if we take it seriously, can lead us to reverse the meaning of the question we usually ask regarding the gift. We no longer ask why we give, but why we do not give, why we resist that drive, that pleasure which activates the same regions of the brain as chocolate!

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Biographical sketch

Jacques Godbout was born in Montreal in 1933. He completed a master's degree in the *Faculté des lettres* at the Université de Montréal in 1954 with a thesis on Arthur Rimbaud, and was appointed to the faculty of the University College of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, where he taught philosophy and French. He returned to Canada in 1957 to work for the National Film Board as a screenwriter (1958-1960), as director of French production (1970), and as a producer and editor. At the same time, he was building a career as a poet, novelist, essayist, playwright and journalist.

Godbout's work includes three volumes of poetry: *Carton-pâte* (1956), *Les Pavés secs* (1958) and *C'est la chaude loi des hommes* (1960). He also wrote *L'isle au dragon* (1976), *Les têtes à Papineau* (1981), and *Une histoire américaine* (1986) about American culture and the French language in North America after the 1980 referendum. He received the Prix France-Canada in 1965 for his first novel, *L'aquarium* (1962), the Governor General's Literary Award in 1973 for *Salut Galarneau!* (1967), and the Prix Dupau from the Académie française for *D'amour P.Q.* (1972). Additional honours include the Prix Duvernay from the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste in 1972 for the body of his work, the Prix Belgique-Canada in 1978, and the Prix du Québec (Athanasie-David) in 1985. He was director and founder of *L'Actualité* and founder of the *Union des écrivaines et écrivains québécois* (1977-1978). He has been publisher and member of the board of Éditions du Boréal since 1987.