

The philosophy of gift giving



The gift is primarily about the relationships being transacted, about the people involved in these transactions rather than the ceremonial giving and receiving of things (Carrier 1995: 19). Write an essay evaluating the role of alienable and inalienable goods in underscoring the importance of exchange transactions.

In order for us to take an in depth look at the idea of gift giving and the relationships involved in such a ceremonial transaction we must first look at the people that are involved in the transaction. Not only must we look at the people but we must also focus on the affiliation between people and the actual object itself. Carrier himself states in his essay; “ Gifts and Commodities” that “ Clearly there is much more in our relationship to objects than sheer utility” (Carrier, 1995. 1), and thus proving to us that there we have a much more intimate relationship with material objects than we first imagined. This bond is deep enough that we even need material objects to define who we are sometimes, for example if a punk rocker claims to be a punk rocker he must dress according to the social image of a punk rocker and from there we can assume that person’s identity and personality as a punk rocker. Carrier says himself that “ The corollary is that objects signify status identity and so constitute a claim to status-group membership on the part of those who have them” (Carrier, 1995. 2). Another major concept that is involved with both the relationship between humans and material objects and with the ceremonial act of gift giving is reciprocity. It shows us and defines to us the strength of the bond between people and material objects.

It goes without a doubt that humans have a natural affiliation with objects as we all have a material need and it is through these objects that we can

control these needs. Carrier states in his essay; “ Gifts and Commodities” that “ Humans do have material needs, and objects can satisfy them” (Carrier, 1995. 1). As I stated earlier we need material objects for a variety of reasons, one of which is for them help define and show our society both our identity and our personality. It is for this reason that we have such a deep connection with material objects, because as long as society continues to exist so will the need for material objects. However this essay, nor is Carrier’s essay, about the connection between people, identity and material objects but instead, as Carrier puts it, we are going to “ investigate the ways that objects are implicated in personal relationships, rather than seeing them in mass structures of meaning and identity” (Carrier, 1995. 10). In order to get a full understanding of such a topic we must first take a look at what is known as reciprocity, reciprocity is a term used to describe the exchange of goods and labour. It was separated into a few separate terms know as, generalized reciprocity, balanced or Symmetrical reciprocity and negative reciprocity. The term which most applies to the ceremony of gift giving is generalized reciprocity as it is described as the event of giving or sharing. It is defined as when a certain individual shares his expertise with another individual in his society who is in need of his goods or labour without expecting anything in return. However this does not define the event as “ reciprocal” as the giver expects nothing in return, but this interaction is indeed “ reciprocal” as the individual who gives his goods is overcome by such satisfaction in giving his services, and the fact that it creates a social bond between the giver and the receiver and that is what he attains in return for his goods or services. In modern day society this seems to occur mainly between parents and children or within married couples as there seems to

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be a certain amount of trust and social interaction involved between the people within the event. It is through these transactions with other people that also help define our identity, not just that material object itself. Carrier himself says that; “ Indeed, in some ways transaction creates the very identities of those involved in it.” (Carrier. 1995. 35) These, reciprocal events help define our relationships with other people, as I said before through these events we can gain social bonds with people but we also need certain amount of social interaction with that same person before we can involve ourselves in such a transaction.

What is also interesting about these transactions, and indeed very much present in the generalized reciprocity that I defined earlier, is that we are indeed a selfish race. We only give gifts so that we may receive something in return. In the context of generalized reciprocity we only give our goods and labour so that it can be returned in the feeling of gratitude and the formation of a social bond. Marcel Mauss states in his essay; “ The Gift” that gifts are never “ free” and as a selfish race we will always expect something in return as we only give so that we may receive. Mauss’ probably most famous question raised by his essay “ The Gift” was; “ What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?”, (Mauss, 1990. 3) an the answer seems to be simple enough. The Power lies not with the object itself but rather with the unspoken contract that it creates with the people involved in the transaction. The giver does not only give away some material object but also gives away a part of themselves with that object; this creates a strong bond between the giver and the item he gave away. Mauss himself says that “ the objects are never completely separated from the men who

exchange them” (Mauss, 1990. 31). Because of this bond between the gift and the giver the receiver has a certain obligation to return the favour to the giver in the form of a gift of the same, if not better value. Although the receiver is not under any law to return in such a manner and it is solely up to him if he returns the favour, the failure to reciprocate often results in the loss of social status and trust amongst his peers. Mauss describes an even greater consequence to the failure of the act of reciprocation, in Polynesia that failure to abide by the obligations of reciprocity results in the loss of “mana” which is a person’s spiritual energy and source of power and wealth. Mauss breaks down the ceremonial event of gift giving into three separate stages and obligations; giving, receiving and reciprocating. Giving is the step that is needed to maintain a social relationship, receiving is the act of acknowledging and accepting that social relationship and failure to accept results in the rejection of that relationship, and last is reciprocating as it shows ones honour and social status within the society. We can see this throughout the ethnography of the Kula ring and the Kula shells, whereby giving the shells away is just as important as receiving them for they are not meant to be kept forever but instead passed on.

Is saying this however we must also look at the concept of “inalienability” in reference to gift exchange as it plays a major part in both Mauss’ essay and the ceremonial act of gift-giving. An inalienable object is something that cannot be exchanged from one individual to another. Instead they have to be sold and the rights of ownership are then passed to the new owner, the object has therefore become an “alienated” item to the original owner as they no longer have the rights to that object however the concept of “free”

gifts is a slightly different one. Instead of the owner selling the object and becoming completely alienated from the item given, the gift instead renders the item under “loan”. Therefore the original owner remains the rightful owner and this rightful ownership has the power to compel the recipient to return the favour. Carrier points out the same concept in his essay where he says that if he buys a bottle of wine in a shop it is now his and can do what he wants with it, including pouring it down the drain, however if his mother buys him a bottle of wine it is her choice for him and becomes a token of her affection towards him and in turn this makes it a part of her identity, he therefore could not simply throw it out like his own bottle of wine. This identity that we find in the object is also what Mauss calls the “hau”. The hau is what is known as the “spirit of the gift”, it lives inside the gift and has a deep connection with its original owner, and therefore the object is constantly trying to return to its rightful owner, increasing the obligation of the receiver to return the gesture of gift-giving. Because the gift is an “inalienable” object and the rights of ownership still belong to the gift giver, the favour must be returned by the receiver as the act of gift giving creates a contract between the people involved and that in turn creates a sort of gift giving social debt that must be repaid by the receiver. So then according to Mauss, if the “free” gift is not returned by the receiver the act of gift giving therefore becomes a contradiction as if the gift is not returned it cannot create social ties because the demands of the obligations are not met. Mauss therefore believes that social solidarity is achieved through the concept of gift giving and the social relations that it creates.

Carrier also raises the issues of alienation within his own essay as he tackles the concepts of the self and alienation. He shows us how some commodities and objects cannot be alienated from our selves as they are too closely linked with our identities. For example Carrier supposes to us that we cannot put our right to vote up for sale, as that is our constitutional right as a citizen to execute, and Carrier also says; “ Equally, one cannot sell ones decision on how to vote.” (Carrier, 1995. 29) What he means here is that we cannot be told how or who to vote for in an election by somebody else in exchange for money. However Carrier does state that “ One can . . . give that decision as a gift” (Carrier, 1995. 29). Carrier goes on to tell us that one cannot sell oneself as that would mean that we are putting ourselves up for slavery, which realistically one cannot do as one cannot alienate themselves from oneself, but one can sell one’s labour ability. And again the same can be said for selling oneself sexually, as that is considered prostitution and punishable by the law, but one can give themselves sexually as a gift. What Carrier is trying to say is that one cannot be alienated from all aspects and the identity of their life, but through the act of gift giving, we can lend our insights, experiences and goods to our peers and those who need them in our society. But Carrier goes on to talk about these inalienable qualities and how they relate us to one another and not to our objects. Carrier says; “ My mother and I are linked by what our society sees as inalienable attributes.” (Carrier, 1995. 31). What he is saying is that the blood bond between himself and his mother defines them and imposes on each of the obligation to interact and transact in certain ways and under certain circumstances. This then in turn can relate to the interactions between a gift giving relationship. “ Thus, gift transactors are social persons defined in significant ways by their inalienable

positions in a structure of personal social relations that encompasses them.” (Carrier, 1995. 31). And thus showing us how gift transactions help define who we are.

In Carrier's essay; “ Gifts and Commodities” he states that; in many societies dominated by gift exchange that structure of kinship provides the basis of people's identities and their relations with each other, and thus their obligations to transact with each other.” What Carrier is trying to say here is that rather than our objects entirely defining who we are, the act of gift giving from person to person may be more important to our identities than the actual object we are giving. The relationship between the giver and the receiver is of utmost importance to their social relationship, the item in this context seems of little importance, for it is through these acts of gift giving and the obligations that ensue the actions that help us build our social relations. This is helped along by the inclusion of alienated objects and inalienable objects within a gift transaction, for both come with certain obligations where we sell an item so it becomes alienable or the object is entirely inalienable to us, both are connected to the relationship between the giver and the receiver, and building a social relationship between the two. It was Mauss who claims that it is these gift giving ceremonies that build the social solidarity of a culture.