The Philosopher’s Gift

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Description :

Une critique de la conception derridéenne du don. On le sait, selon Derrida le don est impossible. Le philosophe ne nous aurait donc rien donné à penser sur le don...

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Abstract. This article considers Derrida s critique of Mauss s *The Gift* and the philosopher s argument that the gift is impossible. In the spirit of the gift, the article engages Derrida in a potlatch-like manner and subjects his critique to the same sort of critical interrogation to which he subjects the gift. The key question raised is why Derrida should want to give this gift of knowledge, namely, that there is no gift. The article argues that despite appearances, and the contradictions in his argument aside, Derrida s gift is the same as the anthropologist s gift. It is the gift of human unity and hence purity and innocence, which is (a) given only insofar as there are no giving agencies man , for instance, or the West.
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Wherever there is time , says Derrida in his critical discussion of Mauss s classic essay *The Gift*, wherever time predominates or conditions experience in general . . . the gift is impossible (Derrida, 1992: 9). This categorical denial of the possibility of the gift posits two interrelated things. First, the gift does not exist because time unravels or disseminates its meaning, so that what experience experiences is not the gift but its substitutes credit, debt, payment. Second, any discourse that purports to discuss the gift as gift, such as Mauss s, is itself impossible except in the trivial sense of having a title by that name or employing an empty term. A discourse on the gift constantly misses its object since it is nowhere to be found in the real world and ends up discussing nothing other than the economy or aspects of it.

Although Derrida poses a radical challenge to Mauss, to the anthropologists who came after him or refer to him (Derrida, 1992: 26) and more broadly to the discipline itself, to my knowledge there has been no systematic response to his critique [1].There may be several reasons for this. To begin with, it is possible that anthropologists find Derrida s argument irrelevant to their endeavour. It could be argued, for instance, that what Derrida criticizes is the pure gift, which is a peculiarly Western phenomenon or, at any rate, a phenomenon most apparent in societies with an advanced division of labour and a clearly demarcated market. The gift in the West, where, as it has been argued (Parry, 1985: 458), gift-exchange . . . has been fractured, leaving gifts *opposed* to exchange, persons *opposed* to things and interest to disinterest may well be impossible. What anthropologists study, however, is not the pure gift but something entirely different a form of prestation in which gift and exchange still hang together and in which persons and things, interest and disinterest are [still] merged (Parry, 1985: 458). There are various versions of this argument in the anthropological literature (see e.g. Strathern, 1990 ; Weiner, 1992) and although, in my view, it begs Derrida s question [2], I shall not go into it. My concern in this article is not with whether Derrida is right and anthropologists wrong but the fact that he thinks he is correct. For Derrida gift-exchange is a contradiction in terms, and his critique of *The Gift* purports to explain why Mauss and the anthropologists who came after him or refer to him cling to this notion. This article attempts to explain why Derrida clings to the notion that gift-exchange is a contradiction in terms.

It is also possible that the general lack of interest in Derrida s critique may have something to do with his image as a postmodernist and hence, some would argue, an enemy of reason and science. But such a summary dismissal would be rather simplistic, defensive and counter-productive. Certainly, it would do very little to further our understanding of his critique, particularly what he imagines is at stake in the anthropological treatment of the gift and more broadly in the discipline. It would do very little also to further our understanding of what may be at stake in Derrida s own deconstructive project. For even if he was an enemy of reason and science, we would still need to know why he embraces the irrational. In fact, as we shall see, in an ironic reversal, madness is what Derrida discerns in Mauss s own discourse.

There is a third possibility. Responding to Derrida s discourse in a potlatch-like manner, that is, with a counter-challenge, cannot be without costs. As Mauss (1990 [1950]: 42) points out, to reciprocate worthily , one must carry out destruction of equivalent value . By this reckoning anthropology would have to burn its candlefish oil and blankets and break its most valuable copper objects (Mauss, 1990: 37). This is to say that to deconstruct Derrida s critique of the gift and expose its metaphysical assumptions, anthropology would have to expose its own first. No doubt, reflexivity of this sort is not always welcome, certainly not by those who see it as navel-gazing those, that is, who find the potlatch risky and opt for a safer game. For what it is worth, this article takes the former course and assumes its risks by raising a set of critical questions: what is at stake in Derrida s categorical truth , namely, that the gift is impossible? What sort of gift is this knowledge given to anthropologists and others interested in such things with a generosity that, by Derrida s own account, is impossible? What is it that obligates Derrida to tell the truth about the gift, which amounts to a refusal of the gift a refusal to accept the possibility of the gift ? What sort of cycle of reciprocity is he reproducing, and what is it that makes it turn ?

The argument developed in this article is that the philosopher s gift is also the anthropologist s gift. It is the gift of human unity and hence purity and innocence, which is (a) given, that is, can be said to exist only insofar as there are no giving agencies man , for instance, or the West. It is because of this gift that Derrida insists on the impossibility of the gift. It is because of this also that anthropologists insist that the gift can be both given and exchanged. Needless to say, I do not claim that the anthropological treatment of the gift can be reduced to the desire for human unity and purity. I am only suggesting that in this area, too, it is possible to discern the discipline s overarching aim to combat ethnocentrism and do away with the division between West and Other.

Philosophy

In our common language and logic , says Derrida (1992: 11), the gift suggests something voluntary: someone wishes, desires, intends to give something to someone else. It also suggests the absence of ulterior motive, since what this someone wishes, desires and intends is to *give*, not to take. If these conditions are not fulfilled, which is always, according to Derrida s argument, there is no gift. The gift becomes something entirely different : an obligation to be met and dispensed with, an attempt to obligate, a display of one s wealth or generosity , which is a self-satisfying and therefore empty gesture empty, that is, of the meaning that our common language and logic assign to the gift. In each case, there is little that separates giving from taking. An obligation dispensed with is taking back, belatedly and with relief perhaps, what is lost when one is placed under obligation, namely, one s sense of independence; an attempt to obligate is a giving with the view of taking; and if display of one s generosity is selfsatisfying, this is because the gift-giver gives with one hand and takes with the other the profits of public recognition, for instance, or the pleasure of knowing that one is doing the right thing.

What little there is between giving and taking is time. The counter-gift, says Bourdieu (1977: 5) in his own discussion of the gift, employing Derridean terminology, must be *deferred* and *different* [3]. Bourdieu s discussion is meant to show that without time there is no gift, which appears to be the reverse of Derrida s argument. The gift that Bourdieu has in mind, however, is a fake , which is precisely Derrida s own understanding of it. For Bourdieu time is required for the fake to pass as a genuine article. Time, he says, is what authorises the deliberate oversight, the collectively maintained and approved self-deception without which symbolic exchange, a *fake circulation* of a *fake coin,* could not operate (Bourdieu, 1977: 6, my emphases). If time is needed for the gift to appear genuine, it is precisely because it has already been recognized as a fake . Bourdieu takes it for granted that the gift is a fake before it enters into circulation. Derrida attempts to explain why.

It makes no difference, according to Derrida, how much time separates giving from taking. The former is always already a version of the latter the gift always already not-a-gift. There is always enough time for this ontological transformation to occur. Hence the need for even more time to allow the actors involved to forget that the gift is a fake and maintain the collective self-deception . A little more than an instant, no matter how little, is enough for the gift-giver to become aware of what he or she is doing, namely, giving a gift. Although the gift-giver may have no

desire to take anything but only to give, as is often the case, he or she will nonetheless receive something in return, even if this something is only a symbolic equivalent the pleasure of knowing that one s gift will make someone else happy, for instance. The return, which annuls the gift, is immediate, the destruction of the gift automatic. A little more than an instant, however little, is also enough for the gift-recipient to become aware of what he or she is doing, namely, accepting a gift. Recognition of the gift as gift places the gift-recipient under obligation to reciprocate, which is to say that at the moment of recognition the gift is ontologically transformed. It becomes a *debt.*

Thus, although everyone understands the meaning of the gift there is precomprehension , according to Derrida, or intuitive understanding no one can have a firm grasp on it. The meaning of the gift is always already disseminated , that is, lost irretrievably in the very act of signification.

> *At the limit, the gift as gift* ought *not [to] appear as gift: either to the donee or the donor*. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift. Neither to the one nor to the other . (Derrida, 1992: 14, emphasis in original)

If the gift does appear, if it becomes (a) present, if there is awareness of it as gift either by the gift-giver or the gift-recipient, the gift is annulled. Paradoxically, its presence as a present signifies its absence. Which is not to deny that there is gift (1992: 26), not to deny, that is, that something is understood, precomprehended, intuited as gift. There is gift , but the gift does not exist, what is intuited can never become the object of *experience* although it can be, as in all gift-exchanges , an object of (bad) *faith*.

Such, then, is Derrida s problematic: there is gift but what exists is nothing other than economy. This gap between gift and economy is fundamental and irreducible, according to Derrida. It is the gap between, on the one hand, thought, language and desire and, on the other, knowledge, philosophy, science (1992: 29), between the imaginary and the ideal and what can be known through experience and is in this sense real. In the history of Western culture, Derrida argues, the tendency has been to disregard this gap and to re-present the imaginary as the real, to make present as a present given generously by the rational subject what by definition is absent. For Derrida this practice defines Western metaphysics the metaphysics of presence in which the anthropological study of the gift itself is deeply implicated :

> This problematic of the difference . . . between the gift exists and there is gift is never . . . deployed or even approached by Mauss, no more than it seems to be, to my knowledge, by the anthropologists who came after him or refer to him. (1992: 26)

Although Mauss and fellow anthropologists have shown that the gift is caught in the round or the contract of usury (Derrida, 1992: 26), they nonetheless insist on referring to all gift supplements as gifts. Mauss does not worry enough , says Derrida (1992: 37), about the incompatibility between gift and exchange. Mauss is not at all bothered about speaking of exchanged gifts; he even thinks that there is gift only in exchange (1992: 39). Apparently Derrida does worry and is bothered, and I shall begin to explore the reasons for his concern in the last section of this article. For the moment, it is necessary to stay with Derrida s evaluation of Mauss s discourse and the discourse of the anthropologists who came after him or refer to him . For they too do not seem to be bothered about speaking of gift-exchange .

If the gift is impossible, any discourse that purports to speak about it as gift is doomed to failure. No matter how hard

it struggles, it will always miss its target and end up speaking about something else. And if it continues to struggle despite all odds, it may even go a little mad . Mauss manoeuvres laboriously , says Derrida (1992: 41), to find the distinctive trait of the gift , that quality which would distinguish it from its supplements . But there is no such quality, and, although Mauss tries hard to keep the meaning of the gift under control, it soon begins to unravel so that in the end it is not clear what gift and non-gift *mean to say* (Derrida, 1992: 47). Because Mauss loses the meaning of the gift, his discourse becomes contradictory, which is a sign of its madness . It is on the subject of honor that madness irrupts into the scene that, in truth, it secretly organizes (1992: 45). The subject of honour refers to Mauss s discussion of the potlatch, in which Derrida detects signs of lexical uncertainty . Whereas, in the preceding paragraphs, he has shown himself to be so scrupulous, so demanding with regard to the *name* gift and the necessity of calling a gift a gift, Mauss will begin to proliferate signs . . . of lexical uncertainty (1992: 45 6). Derrida quotes a long passage from Mauss in which he highlights two key statements. The first statement: In certain cases, it is not even a question of giving and returning gifts, but of destroying, so as not to give the slightest hint of desiring your gift to be reciprocated (Mauss, 1990: 37). The trebling of this uncertainty , says Derrida (1992: 46), affects the word gift but also the word exchange with which Mauss regularly associates it. The second statement: If one so wishes, one may term these transfers acts of exchange or even trade and sale. Yet such trade is noble, replete with etiquette and generosity (Mauss, 1990: 37). Towards the end of the essay, Mauss seems to have given up on the notion of the gift completely :

> The terms that we have used present and gift are not themselves entirely exact. We shall, however, find no others. These concepts of law and economics that it pleases us to contrast: liberty and obligation, liberality, generosity and luxury, as against savings, interest, and utility it would be good to put them into the melting pot once more. (1990: 72 3)

The madness of this essay , says Derrida (1992: 56) resting his case, it ends where it should have begun. . . . As if Mauss is saying to us: Forget everything that has been said in all the preceding pages; we will have to begin all over again.

Let us, then, assume that there is a certain madness in Mauss s essay the madness of contradiction which is the result of trying to grapple with the impossible. The question that arises is why Mauss and the anthropologists who came after him or refer to him would want to engage in this madness. Derrida detects a certain yearning for the bedrock , a romantic desire whose content, he says, is Rousseauist . Mauss repeatedly says that one must *return to* return to what? What Mauss has in mind, according to Derrida, is a return to man s nature, to that eternal morality . . . to that bedrock which has remained closest to the surface in those societies said to be the least advance we can imagine (1992: 65).

> The anthropologist proposes to give back and to come back in a circular manner to the good example, to return to the good inheritance that archaic societies have given or rather bequeathed us. The inheritance that is thus passed down is nothing other, finally, than nature. It is nature that gives and one must show oneself worthy of this gift. One must take and learn the gift of nature. (1992: 66, emphasis in original)

By Derrida s reading, Mauss s endeavour to hold on to the gift reflects little more than the unfulfilled desire for presence . What is to be made present in *The Gift* as a present to the modern world is nature and its goodness, man s nature in its original and uncorrupted condition, and society s nature in its ab-original and authentic state the mythical natural society and natural man (for a related discussion, see Clifford, 1986). Mauss s aim, according to Derrida, is to bridge the irreducible gap between economy and gift, self-interest and generosity, obligation and

freedom, man and his true self, culture and nature, to arrest and reverse the process of degeneration, alienation, dissemination and to achieve plenitude of being which, for Derrida, is precisely what drives Western metaphysics in general.

Anthropology

It would be pointless to deny that anthropological discourses often display a desire for the simple, the authentic and the natural, or that these imputed qualities of non-Western societies are often used to criticize the West. If the condition of possibility of the discipline is the critique of ethnocentrism, this much is perhaps inevitable. Derrida is well aware of the critical role of anthropology and, despite his critique of the discipline, he accords it a privileged place among the human sciences .

Ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentring had come about : at the moment when European culture . . . had been *dislocated*, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference. . . . One can say with total security that there is nothing fortuitous about the fact that the critique of ethnocentrism the very condition of ethnology should be systematically and historically contemporaneous with the destruction of the history of [Western] metaphysics. (Derrida, 1978: 282, emphasis in original)

That anthropology is both the product of and a contributor to the decentring of European culture is something that most anthropologists would probably accept. What is problematic, rather, is Derrida s assumption that the discipline s aim is to replace one culture of reference European culture with another the culture of archaic and primitive societies. The claim is reiterated in Derrida s reading of Lévi-Strauss: One already suspects and all Lévi-Strauss s writings would confirm it that the critique of ethnocentrism . . . has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of original and natural goodness (1976: 114). By Derrida s reading, the critique of ethnocentrism is not about doing away with the opposition between West and Other but about decentring the former and centring the latter.

Derrida s understanding of anthropology clashes with anthropology s understanding of itself or, at any rate, with the conditions of possibility of the discipline we recognize as anthropology. It is at odds with two fundamental anthropological principles cultural relativism, or, more broadly, the principle of the historicity of reason, and the principle of human unity. The former, as any undergraduate anthropology student knows, posits that there are no universal categories of understanding or standards of judgement. Such things are historical, the product of particular social and cultural circumstances. Hence the need to deal with each society in its own right, for what it is. It is true, of course, that cultural relativism is not always consistently applied. As I have just suggested, sometimes non-Western cultures are spoken of as if they were a centre when, for instance, a particular Western practice is under attack. And the other way round: when a particular non-Western practice offends anthropological sensibilities, the West is often acknowledged as the centre. It is also true that, taken to its logical extreme, cultural relativism is for many anthropologists unsettling. Yet these are the inevitable inconsistencies of an ontological predicament : the fact that anthropologists are both part of the world historically situated and hence steeped in a particular culture and not part of it, since they claim to know its meaning among other things, that there are no universal categories of understanding or standards of judgement. Cultural relativism is a metaphysical principle. That anthropologists fail to uphold it is to be expected and only confirms its metaphysical status. Nonetheless, it is a principle without which the critique of ethnocentrism would hardly be possible.

The second principle, equally metaphysical, is the idea of human unity, the governing principle of the field , as Geertz says (1973: 36). This principle operates partly as a corrective to the possible excesses of the first complete epistemological and ethical relativism. But it is prior to it both logically and historically, what renders cultural relativism a necessary strategy to begin with. If human unity is (a) given, and if it is constantly denied by ethnocentrism, this is

because *historically contingent* categories of understanding and standards of judgement are universalized. As is well known, in the history of anthropology the idea of human unity has gone through different phases. It began as the psychic unity of mankind a common human nature expected to double itself at the level of culture and produce the same across the board which, combined with the belief that European culture was the culture of reference , could explain difference only in the negative as absence. It was to be transformed, through the pluralization of the notion of culture at the beginning of the 20th century [4], into something that took firm shape and was fully articulated many decades later. This is the idea of a human nature that becomes complete, that is, fully human, only through culture the latter understood as historically contingent patterns of meaning and therefore, by definition, different from one society to the next. To turn to Geertz (1973: 53) again: To be human . . . is . . . not to be Everyman; it is to be a particular kind of man, and of course men differ. This is to say that, paradoxically, we are the same men because we are different, that difference is the mark of our common humanity. Consistently applied, it is also to say two more things. First, that Western societies do not need to reconfigure themselves along the lines of archaic and primitive societies in order to recover lost value which is Derrida s understanding of anthropology and the anthropology of Rousseau or Herder, for example. Second, that archaic and primitive societies do not need to reconfigure themselves along the lines of Western societies in order to gain value which is the key premise of evolutionism. For 20th-century anthropology, societies *already* embody the same value by virtue of their cultural differences in pretty much the same way that individual men do. If it appears otherwise, it is because difference at the level of cultural form is mistakenly thought to signify difference at the level of cultural content.

The foregoing discussion suggests that anthropology may be driven by a desire for a certain original goodness human unity, purity and innocence. But it also suggests that if there is a model for this, it is not anything empirical. Casting anthropology as a quest for this goodness in the guise of archaic and primitive societies allows Derrida to distance himself from any such desire. But if anthropology is not about centring the non-West in opposition to the West, despite its occasional lapses, if it is about doing away with the opposition, then Derrida s attempt to deconstruct Western metaphysics and decentre the West begins to emerge as a philosophical version of anthropology and a metaphysics on the rebound.

As I have argued elsewhere (Argyrou, 2002), doing away with the opposition between West and Other involves at least three strategies. The first two deal with difference at the level of cultural form and their aim is to show (overlooked) similarities. Typically, these strategies involve locating in non-Western societies what they are imputed to lack and, inversely, locating in Western societies what, in an evolutionist vein, they are said to have transcended. The third and more complex strategy attempts to demonstrate unity at the level of cultural content. The best articulation of this strategy I am aware of comes from Peter Metcalf :

> First, we seek the exotic. . . . Second, we try to fit this alien item cultural trait, custom, piece of behavior into its social and cultural context, thereby reducing it to a logical, sensible, even necessary element. Having done that, we feel that we can understand why people do, or say, or think something instead of being divorced from them by what they say, think or do. (1978: 6)

Difference at the level of cultural form the exotic is thereby shown to be sameness at the level of cultural content. They may say, think and do things differently but this is not because they are different in any essential sense. On the contrary, difference is contingent the result of social and historical circumstances. Under similar circumstances, we would probably say, think and do the same things.

There are countless examples of these strategies in anthropological discourses, including discourses concerning the gift, but here I can sketch only a few. This should go some way in showing that the gift is not only or even mainly used in anthropology as a metaphor for natural society , as Derrida argues, and by extension that the discipline is

not so much concerned with setting up archaic and primitive societies as an alternative centre to the West as with doing away with the opposition. Which, as I have already pointed out but perhaps should reiterate here, is not to say that all anthropological discussions of the gift can be reduced to the latter purpose. My claim is simply that in this case, too, it is possible to trace the overriding anthropological aim of demonstrating human unity as a corrective to ethnocentrism.

I shall turn first to an important article by James Carrier (1995a), which in many ways highlights the issues raised above. The main contention of the article is that the distinction drawn in anthropology and elsewhere between gift and commodity systems is often essentialized so that systems become specific societies non-Western societies emerge as gift societies and Western societies as commodity societies . The problem with this, no doubt, is partly epistemological such a picture does not square with reality. But it is more than that. The distinction, Carrier (1995a: 99) says, is but a slight variation of the distinction between societies of status and contract, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, affective and instrumental rationality, mechanical and organic solidarity, feudalism and capitalism the distinctions, in short, that have been used, in the context of evolutionism at least, to posit Western cultural superiority. The problem of turning non-Western societies into gift societies, Carrier points out, is an instance of the wider problem that Edward Said identified as Orientalism . Following Said, Carrier identifies the problem of turning Western societies into commodity societies as Occidentalism . The aim of his article is to debunk the latter essentialism by showing that, although commodity relations are dominant in Western societies, gift relations are also very much in evidence. Carrier identifies several areas of life in this respect: the family, relations among friends and neighbours, the black market, relations between small shopkeepers and their clients, even at times relations among large corporations the heart of capitalism (1995a: 93). If, then, the gift is a slight variation of status as opposed to contract, affective as opposed to instrumental rationality, mechanical as opposed to organic solidarity, in short, a manifestation of Otherness, its existence in Western societies belies the opposition and places the Other firmly within the West.

It would be easy to provide examples of the reverse strategy locating and highlighting the importance of commodity relations in non-Western societies (see for instance the collection of essays edited by Bloch and Parry, 1989). Since the issue at hand is the gift, however, I shall turn to an example in which the gift is used as a way of locating in non-Western societies what they are imputed to lack a well-known and influential example, I might add, as much as Mauss s *The Gift.* What I have in mind is Malinowski s discussion of the Kula in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* whose rationale is already spelt out in no uncertain terms by Sir James Frazer in his Preface :

> Dr Malinowski . . . shows that [the Kula] is not based on a simple calculation of utility . . . but that it satisfies emotional and aesthetic needs of a *higher order* than the mere gratification of *animal wants.* This leads Dr Malinowski to pass some severe strictures on the conception of the Primitive Economic Man as a kind of bogey who, it appears, still haunts economic text-books and even extends its blighting influence to the minds of certain anthropologists. (1984 [1922]: x, my emphases)

It should be apparent that what is at stake in this debate is the things of a higher order culture as opposed to the mere gratification of animal wants nature. The perception of primitive economic man as a natural being with no culture is belied by the Kula and its pure gifts. Primitives too have culture, much like us . Economists and those anthropologists who think otherwise are simply mistaken [5].

It is true, of course, that Malinowski retracts much about the pure gift in subsequent work: When . . . I describe [in *Argonauts*] a category of offerings as pure gifts and place under this heading the gifts of husband to wife and of father to children, I am obviously committing a mistake (1972 [1926]: 40). This retraction, however, should be read

as yet another deployment of the same strategy, an attempt to locate in primitive societies another object of cultural value. As Parry (1985) rightly observes, in this instance Malinowski s aim was to demonstrate that, far from being slave to custom, the native was motivated by self-interest and as concerned with maximizing returns as any Westerner. What is at stake in this debate, then, is the value of individualism, which, as Malinowski makes clear, many of his predecessors and contemporaries thought to be absent from primitive societies. He was challenging the assumption that in primitive societies the individual is completely dominated by the group (Malinowski, 1972: 3). In this case, too, natives are shown to be very much like us .

To turn to a more recent example and the third strategy Sahlins discussion of the gift and stone age economics : in the Introduction to the book, Sahlins makes clear that his essays were written in opposition to the business-like interpretations of primitive economies and societies (1972: xi) which recalls Malinowki s problem with economists half a century earlier. The problem, Sahlins says, is that business-like interpretations render primitive economies as underdeveloped versions of our own . His study, on the other hand, is culturalist . . . [and] as a matter of principle does honor to different societies for what they are (1972: xi xii). The matter of principle , as we have seen, is in fact not one but two. First, there are no universal categories of understanding or standards of judgement hence the need to study other societies on their own terms. Second, non-Western societies embody the same cultural value and worth as ours , despite or rather because of differences. If they did not, the fact that in the business-like interpretations these societies emerge as underdeveloped versions of our own would not be a problem. Nor, of course, would Sahlins have reason to criticize such interpretations as ideology at home and ethnocentrism abroad (1972: xiv).

True to his word, Sahlins tries to do honor to primitive societies, but whether he succeeds is open to question. He reinterprets the gift as the primitive way of achieving the peace that in civil society is secured by the State (1972: 169), which could in turn be interpreted as an instance of rendering primitive societies as underdeveloped versions of our own . I say could because there is evidence in Sahlins essay to suggest that he might be guilty of precisely what Derrida accuses anthropology of as being a quest for natural society: Except for the honor accorded to generosity, the gift is no sacrifice of *equality* and never of *liberty*. The groups allied by exchange each retain their strength, if not the inclination to use it. This is in contrast to civil society where there is surrender of private force in favor of a Public Power the State (Sahlins, 1972: 170, my emphases). There are Rousseauist echoes in this, no doubt. Nonetheless, the essential point is not whether Sahlins lapses into romanticism or does not succeed in his aim, but the aim itself. If he does not succeed in demonstrating that, far from being underdeveloped versions of ourselves , Others are, in their own way, as developed as we are, this is because of the ontological predicament already referred to: positing universalism human unity through the historically contingent categories of one s culture.

Culture

I have suggested that anthropology is driven by a desire for a certain natural goodness human unity, purity and innocence and that Derrida s own deconstructive project may be implicated in a similar quest. Before I turn to Derrida, however, there are a few things to add to the foregoing discussion. The first thing to say is that this desire is hardly unique to anthropologists. As I have argued elsewhere (Argyrou, 2005), and will turn to briefly below, it is characteristic of what one might call the modernist subjectivity the subjectivity, that is, which cannot tolerate a vision of the world fractured by human divisions. Second, the force of this desire becomes most apparent in the negative instance when the desire is frustrated. Durkheim, among others, was well aware of this and sought to substantiate his claims about mechanical solidarity by pointing to the repressive sanctions reserved for those who undermine it. There are no institutional sanctions against ethnocentrism, repressive or otherwise, and although one could argue that it provokes the sort of sentiments that Carrier describes in the Preface to *Occidentalism* feeling unsettled , repelled , disturbed , dismayed as well as reacting with vehemence (1995b: vii viii) this is hardly enough by way of demonstration. Such frank disclosures are not frequent in anthropological discourses, and I know of no empirical study about how anthropologists react to ethnocentrism or, for that matter, to racism, sexism or

nationalism. Which brings me to another possible index of the force of this desire for human unity.

What I have in mind is the proliferation of social divisions in the 20th century, particularly during the second half. Very schematically, and putting aside the question of class which became prominent in the 19th century, the 20th century stands witness to the emergence of struggles against divisions on the basis of culture, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age (at both ends of the spectrum) and disability. To these we must add, insofar as it follows the same cultural logic, the struggle against what is perhaps the greatest divide of all the division between humanity and nature. No doubt, the proliferation of social divisions could be explained differently. One could argue, for instance, that while the 19th century was classist, the 20th became in addition ethnocentric, sexist, racist, nationalistic, homophobic, ageist, ableist and, as environmentalists say, anthropocentric . Yet all empirical evidence is against such an argument (it would be easy to show that most if not all of these divisions existed prior to the emergence of the struggles against them). A more plausible explanation would be that these divisions acquired relevance and gravity in a determinate cultural context, that they have been discovered and made an object of serious concern as a result of heightened sensitivity towards the abstract and universal, that is, purified human. Rather than being anti-humanistic, then, the 20th century seems to have become far less tolerant to anything perceived to undermine human unity.

If so much is granted, it would be possible to turn to Derrida. At first sight, it appears that there is little or no connection between his deconstructive project and the concern of the modernist subjectivity with human unity and purity. As we have seen, Derrida refuses to accept the possibility of the gift, and hence the gift that archaic and primitive societies make to the modern world which, as Mauss argues, is none other than the *purer* sentiments: charity, social service, and solidarity (1990: 68, my emphasis). If anything, Derrida appears critical of such concerns, even anti-humanistic. In his discussion of the human sciences , for instance, he points out that deconstruction affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism (1978: 292). A similar case can be made about Derrida s dealings with Rousseau another favourite target beyond Mauss and Lévi-Strauss. It might appear , says a sympathetic commentator, that Derrida is out to deconstruct precisely those motifs in the Rousseauist mythology that exerted the most powerful progressive or emancipating force in real political terms the motif, for instance, that man was born free and is now everywhere in chains, the victim of an alienated social existence which corrupts and distorts his good native instincts (Norris, 1987: 124). It might appear that this is what Derrida is trying to do but such is not the case, according to Norris :

> The Rousseauist mythology of origins and presence is one that appeals to a human nature which would somehow preexist all conceivable forms of organized civil society. Though harnessed initially to a progressive current of ideas, it provided in the long run support for those conservative philosophies which held out against the disruptive effects of modern (enlightened) thinking. Rousseau s perpetual harking back to origins was a denial of everything that belonged on the side of reason, progress and history itself. (1987: 126)

There are two issues raised in this extract regarding the possibility of a preexisting human nature, which for the purposes of this article are best kept apart. The first is raised at the beginning and is revisited again at the end: Rousseau posits a human nature before *all conceivable* forms of civil society. If we accept this position, we would have to deny *everything* that belongs to reason, progress and history, in short, *all* human culture. The second issue is raised in the middle of the extract: although initially progressive, the idea of a pre-existing human nature provided in the end support to conservative philosophies . I shall deal with each in turn, but first I wish to return to the quotation in which Derrida relates the gift to nature: The inheritance that is thus passed down [through archaic and primitive societies] is nothing other, finally, than nature. It is nature that gives (1992: 66). This, as we have seen, is how Derrida understands Mauss s argument as an attempt to naturalize the gift, the gift-giver and the societies in which they circulate.

Let us follow Derrida s own reasoning here. If it is nature that gives, and if, as he insists, there is nothing to separate giving from taking, nature takes at the same time. Nature gives with one hand and takes with the other. What nature gives as a gift is the given, the essential, the fundamental. And it gives on one condition that is why it also takes the condition that the given does not change but remains what it is: original, authentic, genuine, pure, in a word, natural. What it takes with the other hand, what it denies those who accept its gift, is the very possibility of change or, to be more precise, the possibility of a change that would be natural and therefore good authorized, legitimate change. Under such circumstances only nature can change itself any other change would simply be unnatural. To change nature, of course, is to make culture. Hence recognition of nature as the giving agency is at the same time denial of the value of human agency and its products all conceivable forms of civil society and everything that belongs to reason, progress and history, as Norris says. No matter what reason conceives, nothing would ever match the value of the gift that nature gives. At best, culture would *always* be, like Derrida s gift a fake at worst, alienation and decline. Derrida refuses to accept the possibility of the gift because nature as the original giving agency leaves no room for men to give and take.

It is through a similar sort of stubbornness and the determination to make room for man that the Enlightenment was born or, at any rate, so the story goes. Despite his anti-humanist rhetoric the call to pass beyond man and humanism Derrida emerges as as much of a man in this respect as any Enlightenment thinker. But he is nonetheless also a man who has chosen to reckon with the unintended consequences of enlightened humanism as in *Specters of Marx*, for instance, where Derrida calls for a new Enlightenment for the century to come (1994: 90).

It is often said that the Enlightenment deified man and made him the only relevant Subject of the world the Subject that would master nature, change society, make his own history. But it is also said now more than ever that this transformation had consequences not anticipated by the luminaries of the time. As the modernist subjectivity so often argues, this same man in the guise of white, European, middle-class, heterosexual male turned into an object not only of nature but also of his fellow men . This brings me to the second issue raised by Norris, namely, the conservative philosophies that hold out against the effects of modern (enlightened) thinking . It should be apparent that, to the extent that they do hold out, it is because they capitalize on a preexisting , unchangeable nature to legitimize this Subject man, for instance, or the West. Hence the reaction of the modernist subjectivity whenever human divisions and inequalities are said to be grounded in the gifts or given of nature. If there is anything that the modernist subjectivity knows with certainty, it is that the social order and its categories are historical or social or cultural constructs.

It is this very Subject that Derrida is at pains to deconstruct, which is to say, cut down to size the size of everyone else. This is why he is worried and bothered about Mauss s discussion of the gift Mauss s insistence that, although there are or should be no free gifts, exchange in archaic and primitive societies is nonetheless noble, disinterested and free. To return once again to the quotation in which Derrida draws the implications of naturalizing the gift: It is nature that gives and one must show oneself To be worthy of the gift of nature is to learn to give as nature does, spontaneously, naturally, outside or beyond the constraints imposed by society and culture. It is to constitute oneself as a disinterested, free, freefloating, transcendental subjectivity, the mirror-image of the sort of agency that in many mythologies, including the Judeo-Christian, is attributed to primal ancestors or gods the original givers, who, being original, give without having already taken. It should be apparent that if there is giving of this sort, there are also Subjects and therefore objects. Mauss, as much as the anthropologists who came after him or refer to him , was well aware of the sort of social divisions and inequalities that giving could produce: To give is to show one s superiority, to be more, to be higher in rank, *magister*. To accept without giving in return, or without giving more back, is to become client and servant, to become small, to fall lower (*minister*) (1990: 74). Derrida s refusal to accept the possibility of the gift should be read as a refusal to accept that the world is divided into magisters and ministers , Subjects and objects. This is not to say to refuse to accept that it is divided in this way as a result of historical circumstances. It is to say, rather, to refuse to accept that such divisions may be natural and necessary.

Rather than Subjects, Derrida sees everywhere subjects, limited individuals who are limited in the same way. In the place of the donor agency the natural and therefore transhistorical giver he places agencies that cannot give without taking, even when what they really wish to do, what they desire, is only to give. The giver :

> . . . never give[s] anything without calculating, consciously or unconsciously, its reappropriation, its exchange, or its circular return and by definition this means reappropriation with surplus-value, a certain capitalization. We will even venture to say that this is the very definition of the *subject as such*. (Derrida, 1992: 101, emphasis in original)

This is so because calculation, reckoning, figuring, figuring out, in short, understanding, is constitutive of the subject. To be a subject, someone capable of identifying [oneself] by keeping and naming [oneself] (Derrida, 1992: 23), is to be aware that one gives objects, symbols, meanings. And this, as we have seen, is enough to annul the gift and to belie the natural giver. Such is the limit of the subject, the mark of its finitude.

This limit is not unknown in the social sciences, even if perhaps not always as rigorously enforced. The subject of the social sciences, whose business is to know the social world and tell the truth about it, is as limited as Derrida s giving subject. It is historically or socially or culturally situated and therefore, as anthropologists insist, has no access to universal categories of understanding or standards of judgement. This is to say, as we often do say, that what it gives can never be pure knowledge a free gift that this knowledge is always contaminated by the subject s circumstances and hence interested. Not that it is a question of pursuing one s interests intentionally. What the subject of the social sciences wishes to do, what it desires above anything else, is to *give*, not take. The reappropriation , rather, is unconscious . No matter how reflexive this subject might be, it can never be totally impartial, unbiased, objective, in short, *disinterested*. Its giving always, inevitably, involves a certain capitalization .

The finitude of Derrida s subject, then, is the philosophical version of the finitude of the subject of the social sciences. It is, as we have seen, the finitude to which the modernist subjectivity always appeals whenever a Subject appears on the scene, the means by which the Subject is reduced to the size of the subject, which is the size of everyone else. It is, in short, the means by which the modernist subjectivity maintains its vision of human unity, purity and innocence. The philosopher s gift the gift of knowledge which posits that there is no gift and no giving agencies is also the anthropologist s gift the gift of knowledge which posits that, contrary to any form of ethnocentrism, there are no giving societies, no cultures of reference , no intrinsic divisions between the West and its Others.

It is because of this gift that the gift is said to be impossible or both gift and exchange at the same time. Although the contradiction or shall we say madness ? involved in this gift a unity that must be (a) given but cannot is readily apparent, the consequences for both those afflicted by it and those who must put up with it are far from clear.

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[1] Although there have been commentaries, for instance, Jenkins (1998). See also Laidlaw (2000). On peut lire aussi : A. Caillé, Don, intérêt et désintéressement , 1994 [2005], MAUSS/La Découverte. Ndlr.

[2] For what exactly is the impure gift that anthropologists study? And how does one distinguish it from the pure gift and/or the economy? Is the difference between the two gifts a matter of degree or kind? If the latter, as seems to be the case, why persist in calling the impure (gift) a gift ?

[3] The explanation of Derrida s notion of *differance*.

[4] This is already clear in Malinowski : *Perhaps man s mentality will be revealed to us, and brought near, along some lines which we have never followed before. Perhaps through realizing human nature in a shape very distant and foreign to us, we shall have some light shed on our own. (1984 [1922]: 25)*

[5] Which is an argument made by Mauss himself: We shall see how far removed they are from a state of nature as regards law and economics (1990: 5).

