

The Gift of Nature in Mauss and Derrida

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Abstract

This essay proposes a reinterpretation of Marcel Mauss's famous *The Gift* with a focus on the question as to why gifts obligate recipients. Mauss argues that for the archaic cultures he studies, a donor is not separable from the thing given, so that the recipient also receives some of the donor's 'spirit' that wishes to return to its origin. In my reconstruction, I stress that the donor is not separable from her gift because it is understood to come from her tribe, its tradition and ancestors, as well as from its 'native soil' and natural elements, which are taken to be inassimilable by the recipient. I then examine Derrida's reading of Mauss in view of this unpossessable and the role of natural elements in it. In the face of Derrida's rejection of Mauss's foundationalist use of a cyclical nature, I conclude that for both authors nature may not only name the desire for the origin, but also a differential and open-ended force that turns and re-turns in all gifts.

Keywords

Mauss; Derrida; gift; normativity; foundation; society; nature

Introduction

Marcel Mauss' famous *Essai sur le don* proposed a new theory of the origin of society and normativity by addressing the question why a gift obliges the recipient to reciprocate. Ever since Claude Lévi-Strauss's critique of the essay as too reliant on 'magical' notions, however, Mauss's answer to this question has seemed either unconvincing or unclear. In this essay, and in response to Derrida's reading of Mauss in particular, I will provide a new attempt to understand Mauss's account. Mauss argues that for the archaic cultures he studies, a donor is not separable from the thing given, so that the recipient also receives some of the donor's 'spirit' that

wishes to return to its origin. In my reconstruction, I stress that the donor is not separable from her gift because she is not taken to be the *sole* owner. Rather, a gift is understood to come from her clan or tribe, its tradition and ancestors as well as from its 'native soil' and natural elements, which are taken to be unpossessable. The obligation to reciprocate then stems from the fact that in accepting the gift, the recipient also assimilates that which remains inassimilable, and thus cannot but be passed on to others and to nature. It is this inassimilable, 'natural', untraceable element in the gift that is named the spirit (*hau, mana*) and the force of the thing, a spirit conceived as co-constitutive of both donor and recipient.

Linking this unpossessability or alterity and its force to *différance*, Derrida turns against what he calls the 'Rousseauist schema': the attempt to trace society and normativity back to an archaic origin and to a nature whose foundational status and cyclical turning ensure the gift returns to its origin. In this vein, he criticises Mauss as well as Lévi-Strauss for their attempt to return to the archaic and the elemental, to seek to found the *socius* on a bedrock, a firm foundation as origin of every gift. In response, I will argue that the indeed problematic nature of the Rousseauism should not lead us to overlook the role of the non-cultural, material or 'natural' in gifts as they circulate in and between cultures. Nature does not only name the desire for the origin, but also the unownable elemental that turns and returns, non-cyclically, in all gifts.

Mauss

Since its first publication in 1924, Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* continues to attract interest among anthropologists, sociologists, economists and philosophers, in particular those with an interest in explaining the origin and on-going institution of society as well as the force of normativity among social actors. As Marshall Sahlins famously wrote in his *Stone Age Economics*, the question Mauss is after in *The Gift* is that of Thomas Hobbes, though the answer is very different. That question concerns the foundation of society understood as a normative order. If Hobbes finds it in the social contract that forms the State, then Mauss finds it, prior to the state, in the gift and, specifically, in the Maori 'hau', the spirit that demands that a gift be returned.¹ This spirit yields a very different account of human nature: 'if as Macpherson argues, Hobbes' conception of human nature is just the bourgeois eternalized, then Mauss is squarely opposed to it'.²

For Mauss, the gift indeed promises 'a general theory of obligation' as well as 'one of the human foundations on which our societies are built'.³ We must return to these foundations in order to address 'certain problems posed by the crisis in our own law and economic organization' (5). As a non-Marxist socialist, Mauss saw these problems as related to the capitalist disruption of social relations, its individualism, and the pre-valence of utilitarian self-interest, which today is too often taken to be natural. The gift can help us see that the eminently modern alternative of self-interest or altruism is mistaken (93). The human being is no utility-calculating machine (98) whose only reason to engage in relations with others has always been to barter for his own ends. A mistaken theory of human nature cements the status quo in the form of a retrospective historical teleology. The

apologetic political economists suggest that from barter developed, as if by a necessary law of history, sale for money, and eventually our own more advanced economy built on credit (46). The problem with all this, Mauss counters, is just the lack of historical evidence, especially in archaic societies. Prior to self-interested barter, what we in fact find is the prevalence of gift-relations, which already imply a complex system of credit and suggest a more complex human being than *homo oeconomicus* (98).

This non-Marxist (and thus non-Leninist) critique of classical political economy, social contract theory and today's rational choice theory may explain the massive interest in Mauss's work, lasting to this day.⁴ To counter the conception of human nature as basically self-interested, however, you have to be able to explain why a gift should obligate the recipient to reciprocate. If the gift did not bind the recipient to return the favour, the gift could not institute social relations. All we had would be one-offs without actors bound to each other in a lasting way. And this would be the case even if the donor was obligated to give to others, for whatever reason; gifts would remain aleatory occurrences, unable to commit actors to each other.

Hence, to help explain the origin of society and an on-going socialization, the recipient's obligation to return the gift has to be the crux of the matter, even more so than the donor's prior reason for giving. If the recipient is obligated to return the favour, then a chain is created by the very first gift: every other recipient is now obligated to give, in an open-ended manner. Once a gift has been given, the debt is always unpaid somewhere. The social net demands re-weaving at each of its knots,

strengthening existing ties or opening up to new ones. This is, we may assume, Mauss's reason for privileging the recipient's duty over the donor's (4, 9, 16, 23).

So how does Mauss explain the return-obligation? Here is the most relevant, if dense and lengthy passage:

What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged is the fact that the thing received is not inactive [*n'est pas inerte*]. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary [...]. This is because the *taonga* ['everything that may properly be termed possessions, everything that makes one rich, powerful, and influential, and everything that can be exchanged [...] precious articles[...] sometimes even the traditions, cults, and magic rituals'] is animated by the *hau* ['the spirit of things'] of its forest, its native heath and soil. It is truly 'native', the *hau* follows after anyone possessing the thing. It not only follows after the first recipient, and even, if the occasion arises, a third person, but after any individual to whom the *taonga* is merely passed on. In reality, it is the *hau* that wishes to return to its birthplace [*lieu de sa naissance*], to the sanctuary of its forest and the clan, and to the owner.⁵

In a nutshell we will crack open and develop in a moment, then, the 'archaic' mindset (here, of the Maori, but Mauss is fond of generalising on the basis of the many ethnographical sources he considers) believes, according to Mauss, that (a) the donor is not separable from the thing given, so that the recipient receives some of the donor's 'spirit', and (b) this spirit wishes to return to its origin. The recipient is bound to the giver because she⁶ has something in her possession that is animated

by a spiritual force seeking to return to the owner, either directly or, more often, indirectly, by being passed on to a third party (14).

One can see why Lévi-Strauss would later complain, in a famous introduction to Mauss's work, that Mauss takes over a self-explanation from the peoples studied that is simply too spiritualist: to accept the *hau* or the *mana* (which Mauss translates as a kind of spiritual life force: 11) as the central explanatory element is to forego a more 'rationalist' and 'objective' explanation. What is called for is an explanation of the origin of normativity among human beings and the socialization of individuals and groups 'without recourse to magical and affective notions'.⁷ The reliance on *mana* and *hau* in Mauss's text has also been criticised for an illicit generalization, a critique that has been extended to Derrida's reading of it.⁸ Above all, however, there is widespread disagreement in the extensive secondary literature on just what makes the return-gift obligatory. In reviewing this literature, David Graeber cites twenty scholars who re-interpret the '*hau* of the gift' and notes that 'just about none of these authors accepts Mauss's own interpretation'.⁹

I will not be able to discuss these interpretations here, many of which are based on the scholar's own, often year-long, ethnographical field work. Much would have to be said about the power of the gods, the divine generativity of nature (which was also called *hau*), the taboos surrounding violations of natural power or *mana* and so on.¹⁰ The limited goal here is not to contribute to the ethnographical efforts aimed at understanding the indigenous explanations on their own terms, but to interpret Mauss's text while stressing the unpossessable in gift-giving. I focus on that which neither donor nor recipient can make their own, and which I take to be

part of what the contested 'spirit' of the thing involves, because this aspect seems not to have received due consideration in explaining the recipient's obligation.¹¹ Further, it is an aspect that I think plays a central role in Derrida's own, perhaps recondite, reconstitution of Mauss's argument. Read in this way, Derrida's quasi-ontology supports Mauss's explanation of normative force. However, the role of 'nature' in the unpossessable, I will argue, merits a closer look at Derrida's reading.

Before discussing Derrida's account of the normative force of the gift, then, let me try to reconstitute Mauss's reasoning. It helps to separate two key claims that appear in the passage just cited—claims I marked (a) and (b)—and to begin with (a), the inseparability of donor and thing given. The archaic mentality that Mauss seeks to extract from several different sources views the donors as not separable because they are not the sole owners; ownership is here not an exclusive all-or-nothing relation. This is one of the places where one should keep in mind Mauss's warning of economic 'modern ideas' (46), including individualistic and developmental prejudices. In studying the gift in archaic societies, Mauss believes, we are tracing one of the true sources of our own societies, but this source should not be misunderstood on the basis of individual ownership. In fact, archaic mentality understands the gift as coming from the owners' clan or tribe, their tradition, ancestors and their 'native soil' (the forest and its 'wild fowl', the earth and the sea, 14). The donor gives something that she cannot be said to have made all by herself; her ancestors and her native soil contributed to her ownership and to her ability to give it. When giving, she inevitably gives something that she cannot fully claim for herself.

Further, these enabling factors of her ability to give also co-constitute her as a person. Her native habitat and her traditions, the customs and skills of her tribe and the actual collaboration of others in the production of the thing given make the donor who she is.¹² This is particularly evident when the donor gives on behalf of a group, as was usually the case, but would presumably hold even without such representational element. To be sure, there is an element in the thing given that is the donor's, but the relation is not a two-factor possessive relation, but rather a three-party co-constitutive relation: both the gift and the donor owe themselves to a preceding context that makes donor and gift inseparable from each other. The preceding context is part of what the donor cannot fully claim as her own. In this way, the threefold relation explains both the inseparability of giver and gift and the fact that the gift is the donor's, but not fully, retaining an element of inappropriable alterity that even the donor cannot appropriate as hers alone. The *taonga*, Mauss writes, 'are strongly linked to the person, the clan, and the earth' and only as such can they become 'the vehicle for its *mana*, its magical, religious and spiritual force'. It is this force that asserts itself over the recipient when 'the obligation to reciprocate may fail to be observed' (13). This tense relation between inseparability and giving as separation, and further between appropriative ownership and inappropriability, is a decisive factor in the obligation to reciprocate.

Before moving on to consider what this threefold relation means for the recipient, let us notice that the *hau* or *mana* is not just an immaterial 'spirit' of things. It is linked to the dead, to be sure, and to cultural practices and collective collaboration, but it is also tied to the earth, the sea, the native soil and its animals.

In indicating a kind of natural productivity, the *hau* is material and natural as well as 'spiritual'. In fact, the translation as 'spirit' may have caused many misunderstandings, as it suggests, at least to Western ears, the binary divisibility between reality and magic, nature and culture, matter and mind, persons and things, individuals and groups. As opposed to this divisibility, Mauss underlines that the force of *mana* over the recipient is 'moral, physical, and spiritual' (16). The force binds people to one another, within and between clans and tribes, by way of natural elements and cultural artefacts that are not simply distinct entities.

Mauss draws in part on the natural-material element in the thing given to explain why the donor should give in the first place. Nature in particular, often approached by way of animistic gods, as well as that which the dead contributed to the living cannot be exclusively owned by the donor and her clan; consequently, the recipient already had some claim, however indirect, to the thing given. 'Also, one gives because one is compelled to do so, because the recipient possesses some kind of right of ownership over anything that belongs to the donor. This ownership is expressed and conceived as a spiritual bond' (17). This is so not because donor and recipient are co-owners, but because the animistic gods and the dead are the 'true owners of the things and possessions of this world' and they are therefore 'one of the first with which human beings had to enter into contract' (20). All exchanges take place in the enabling context of 'the spirits of the dead, the gods, things, animals, and nature' (18). These 'spirits' are incited by the gift-relation to be generous to humans: to give to you does not only establish a relation with you, but re-establishes contact with the dead and with nature. This is why the donors, as

representatives of their tribes, often wear masks of their name-sakes, the animistic nature gods and the spirits of the dead (20).

In several places, Mauss stresses that the elements and forces called gods, nature and the dead can hardly be understood on the basis of assumptions that individuals are separate from each other and from their culture, their land, their ancestors and so on. He stresses that these elements, indispensable to the gift relation, mix individuals and groups as well as spiritual and physical things in an on-going traffic to and fro (17-18). This *mélange*, including the natural element, expresses the inappropriability of the gift on the part of both donor and recipient. And yet, this inappropriable, unpossessable element in the gift is co-constitutive of the donor's subjectivity (her nativity, birth and origin). The donor's authority and very power to give depend on the context of emergence in the clan, the lineage and the native soil.

It is this unpossessable yet constitutive element that is crucial in explaining the second claim (b), the claim that the recipient has to give back because the spirit of the thing wishes to return to its origin (15). The 'origin' in question is not principally the donor, but this entire context of the gift's emergence. By co-making both the donor who she is and the thing given, the 'spirit' passes into the gift and on to the recipient, who is thereby tied to the land, the earth, the forest, the donor's tradition and clan and the donor: that is why the donor has imparted herself along with the thing.

For this reason, the recipient cannot just keep the gift for himself but must pass its 'spirit' on. The giving does not make the gift his alone now, first because the

donor was not the sole owner and so did not have the exclusive power and right to give it; the donor cannot transfer such rightful power to the recipient to keep it. This is the case even if, in some sense, the clan, the dead and the nature-gods authorised the donor to give it, for, second, what the donor could not fully appropriate could also not be fully made his own by the recipient. The recipient *cannot* (in all of its senses, from factual to normative) keep (all of) the gift because its *hau* makes it foreign to him. Coming from the other, but not such that the thing given is fully separable from the donor, it keeps some of the other, and so remains foreign (16). There is something *inassimilable* or indigestible in the gift that does not belong to the recipient, and so he cannot and should not assimilate it and make it his own. This alterity, named the spiritual force of the thing given, a natural force that is also 'law' and thus a normative force (13), cannot be mastered or destroyed. It precedes the recipient as it precedes the donor. As neither of them can fully own it, it not only precedes them, but exceeds them toward a future: the recipient has to pass it on.

As we can see, then, the obligation to reciprocate stems from the fact that in accepting the gift, the recipient assimilates that which will remain other even as it co-constitutes his subjectivity as well as (though in a different way) that of the donor. The recipient assimilates something that was, or becomes, a part of him. And yet, as a result of the incompleteability of the assimilation, something of the gift must pass on to (yet) others. In accepting the gift, the recipient acknowledges that this lack of full separation between donor-subject and gift also holds for him: he too has always already received gifts from others, from his culture and from nature,

things that make him who he is and which root him in a 'native' soil, a habitat, a tribe and a lineage.

This third element, then, the context of production, precedes and exceeds donor, recipient, and their transaction. To then say, as Mauss does, that the 'the recipient has to give back because the spirit of the thing wishes to return to its origin' (15), is not only to view the thing as animate, but to impose a circle on the excess: the thing desires to return to its 'birthplace'. This is understandable if life in general, before the nature-culture or nature-history divide, is seen as cyclical: all things and people would come to be from, and return to, the same sacred or mythical source, typically figured as the life-spirit.¹³ The spirit of life or of nature would be seen as the ultimate foundation of social relations. The obligation to return the gift would then also be an obligation to return to nature as the single source of society and normativity.

Even if he does not advocate this foundational naturalism in his own name in *The Gift*, Mauss counsels a circular return, this time historical rather than natural. In our capitalist times in which, 'Fortunately, everything is still not wholly categorised in terms of buying and selling' (83), the normative force inherent in returning the gift at a later time translates into the duty to return to the traditions of gift-giving. The study of the archaic practices that honour circular nature in this way is mandated by the return-gift: 'We can and must return to archaic society', Mauss writes in his 'Moral Conclusions', for: 'This morality is eternal' (88-9). We 'should return to laws of this kind' (88), laws that demand generosity and show that our modern lives 'are still permeated with this same atmosphere of the gift'. In the social

insurance legislation of his day, which he sees as a form of 'state socialism', Mauss recognises that 'we are returning to a group morality' (87). This morality, one that is not fully separable from political economy or from foundational sociology, is that of the gift as 'one of the human foundations on which our societies are built' (5).

However, we should note that early on, when considering the reason for returning the gift, Mauss is not just content with that archaic, cyclical foundationalism. He wonders why his principal source (a Maori elder famously cited by Elsdon Best) stresses that the recipient passes the gift on to a third party instead of returning a gift to the donor. Why this 'intervention of a third person' (14-15), and the resulting priority of indirect over direct reciprocity? Mauss's explanation seems to be that the *hau* of the gift emerges, or becomes visible, in particular if the return-gift is made to a third person: when A gives to B, and B to C, but C now still has the *hau* of A though she had no direct contact with A, then the spirit must indeed be in the thing. This continuity of the *hau*, even beyond a context in which A participates, could be explained by saying that it is still the same spirit (life force, nature, etc.) that remains identical to itself. But could it not also be that the continuity is not so much, or exclusively, that of an identity, but of an unpossessable alterity of which we could not simply say that it stays the same across different contexts?

Let us consider that the very relation established or renewed by the gift must alter donor and recipient if neither of them is totally separable from things given. In accepting an inassimilable alterity, even while passing it on, the recipient must be altered by it if the gift is also co-constitutive of subjectivity. This alteration comes to

the fore for instance in the recipient's indebtedness to the donor, her clan and her native soil, and the bond but also antagonism that goes along with the gift (8). This alteration is related to the alterity that circulates, precedes and exceeds both, and gives it force. So even if B returned the gift to A instead of passing it on to C, A would no longer be exactly the same, the stable origin of the gift. Strictly speaking, then, there would be no return of the spirit to its origin. The 'circulation' of the spirit would be much more open-ended, an open-endedness that precisely (as we saw) calls for renewed gifts, but also sets the recipient free to the extent that he is not just bound to the donor, but will already have become a donor himself, connecting with yet others in a merely quasi-circular chain.

Admittedly, though it is not foreign to his text, Mauss does not emphasise the productivity of the gift-relation or underline this move from alterity to alteration. This emphasis will surface in Derrida.

Derrida's gift

The ambiguity in the source of the gift, in particular the oscillation between nature as stable source and nature as unpossessable alterity, comes to the fore in Derrida's reading of Mauss. This reading is complex, and I cannot do it full justice here. The complexity is increased by the fact that *Given Time* is announced as only the first of two volumes, with the second never having been published.¹⁴ Further, the text we do have presents a complex interweaving of Mauss's empirical-ethnographical studies of the gift in non-Western and pre-modern societies, and Heidegger's

ontological account of the gift of being as wrested from the Western tradition and pitted against its modern occlusion in the technological epoch.

To forego a lengthy reconstitution of Derrida's text, then, I will begin by focusing on the way that Derrida explains the obligatory nature of the return-gift, paying particular attention to the role of what I called the unpossessable. As we will see, what I just called the unpossessable alterity and its normative force—the thing demands to be passed on from the recipient—as well as its role in constituting subjects will be linked to *différance*. In fact, when Mauss stresses that 'time' is logically implied in returning gifts (they cannot be returned right away; *The Gift*, 36), Derrida equates time with *différance* (*Given Time*, 39, cf. 12, 40, 42). Later in the text, he writes that "This "logic" and this "aporetics" of the gift here deploy those of *différance*' (127). Let us then take a brief look at this 'logic' in view of the gift.

Différance names the quasi-transcendental condition of the identity of things as well as of subjects. The term seeks to articulate both the movement of differentiation that characterises any mark or identity in a system of referral, and the inescapable deferral of the self-reference or self-affirmation of identity. Difference and deferral—or, as Derrida also says, temporalisation and spacing [*temporalisation et espacement*]¹⁵—entail the need for contexts as well as the inexhaustibility of, and independence from, contexts. If an identity can come to be established only as a result of spacing, that is, by differing from other elements, then these other identities form a necessary and necessarily preceding context. In the case of human subjects, histories, traditions, languages, ancestors and parents are indispensable in giving birth to agents who may become donors themselves.

Contexts co-determine identities so that they carry within themselves contextual factors. People drag their inheritance along as a surfacing whale its wake.

However, preceding contexts do not determine identity conclusively. Identity is not enclosed in a given horizon because the context consists only of on-going processes of differentiation. Contexts themselves change with every repeated self-affirmation of an identity in that context. Affirmation involves iterated appropriations from merely comparatively stable circumstances and the novel uses and futural projections of contextual elements. An identity exists only by changing, and never 'is' stable, but only in the process of being stabilised. Vintage Derridean terms such as 'trace', 'spectre', the prefix 'quasi-' and the many locutions of the form 'X without X'¹⁶ are meant to capture this condition between identity and difference, presence and absence, past and future. Identities are differing-deferring to an unforeseeable future that we know will never arrive as such.

It may already have become evident how relevant this brief review of *différance* is to Mauss's discussion of the gift. In this spectral ontology—which Derrida here pits against 'French structuralism of the 60s', in which Lévi-Strauss's removal of 'magical and affective notions' in favour of 'underlying structures' is said to have "“influenced”" (Derrida puts quotation marks around 'influence') 'Lacan and Foucault, Barthes or Althusser' (75-6)—with this spectrality, the vexed and contested notion of 'spirit' ('hau', 'mana', 'wakan', etc.) should be seen as less problematic, though perhaps no less difficult to comprehend. The elements that I identified as crucial to the return-obligation are re-deployed by differential iterability: first, the necessity of preceding contexts and their role in gift-giving;

second, against this enabling background, the inseparability of donor and thing given; finally, the donor and the recipient's appropriation of what in the end remains unpossessable, and therefore cannot but be passed on toward an open-ended future to-come.

On Derrida's account, a gift proceeds from three intermeshed sources: a subjectivity capable of *intending* to give (11, 27, 101, 123); the gift of being (Heidegger's '*es gibt Sein*', 'there is being' but literally 'it gives being'), which Derrida reformulates as *différance* (19-20); and what I just called the context in histories, traditions, ancestors, and groups, clans or tribes—if you wish, the 'empirical' sources of the donor's capacity to give. These three elements are not fully separable because, as we heard, the identity of the donor-subject requires a differential context for its emergence. Similarly, *différance* cannot be thought independently of identities-in-process and their contexts because it merely names the gap, the temporalising spacing, between them: no relation without *relata*. *Différance* in the gift is only ever traced in 'empirical' history, as its very temporalisation, its bind or its hold on subjects.

How can this account help us to understand the normative force of the gift, the obligatory nature of the return? Derrida leaves no doubt that, because '*différance is inscribed in the thing itself* that is given or exchanged', donor and donee are compelled to recognise a 'mysterious force' that 'demands gift *and* restitution' (40; Derrida's emphases). And this demand governs all scientific discourses on gift-giving, however much they strive to refrain from prescribing or taking sides, for they too owe themselves to previous accounts, to the inheritance of a language, a

tradition, and so on. (Mauss's essay in particular depends on the ethnographical studies he himself did not undertake, but those too depend on the Maori, the Trobrianders, the Haida and the Tlingit, the Yuit and the Inuit, and so on.) There is no truly objective and neutral meta-level from which to describe the gift; any essay on the gift is 'a priori a piece [...] of a performative, prescriptive and normative operation' (62). Derrida sums up the content of this normativity in its very aporetics:

One must opt *for* the gift, for generosity, for noble expenditure, for a practice and a morality of the gift ("one must give") [*Il faut opter pour le don, pour la générosité, pour la dépense noble, pour une pratique et une morale du don ("il faut donner")*][...] But—because with the gift there is always a “but”—the contrary is also necessary: One must [*il faut*] limit the excess of the gift and of generosity, to limit them by economy, profitability, work, exchange. (62; translation modified; *Donner le temps*, 85-6)

Put schematically, *différance* gives rise to normative force due to the fact that, as we saw, a subject cannot but appropriate things from others, but such appropriation is never complete and will not return full circle to the subject; it is what Derrida calls an ex-appropriation (81, 151) that will have to leave a remainder. An appropriation is also an investment in one's context, a giving (back) to it, an implication in something larger that precedes and exceeds the self.¹⁷ Given that identity is not plainly given, that subjectivity is not simply there to begin with, to *be* at all means to seek to come back to oneself from the context of appropriation to which *différance* turns and opens the self again and again. A subject's appropriation from context, its

self-affirmation, implies a limit to the gift and demands that one calculate what comes back to oneself; it thus implies exchange, work, (restricted) economy and profitability as well as responsibly giving an account of oneself and one's gifts (63; cf. 101).

But given the deferral implied in *différance*, the calculation is opened to an incalculable or disseminative future, even though, qua incalculable, it co-constitutes the calculating subject. The gift breaks open the intended circle of return. There is 'an essential passage between the gift and this dissemination' as that which 'does not return to the father, or that which does not *return* in general' (47). Even if the donor always calculates a return, the disseminative *différance* of the gift implies its unpossessability and non-return. If all giving is enabled by the differing-deferring that entails context-boundedness as well as disseminative context-transcendence, but if dissemination also thwarts subjective efforts at anticipating, let alone controlling, how the gift is received, understood and what is done with it (122), then dissemination makes of every gift a gift without return to the donor. A gift binds and obligates the recipient, but also releases and unbinds her, lets her loose to do with it what the donor cannot expect or control, by deferring and opening the social practice to an unknowable future.

The theme of the unpossessable I stressed in Mauss thus returns here as the incalculable and the 'something larger' which the self cannot fully appropriate, even if it must do so to some extent. As the deferral to an open-ended future that co-constitutes the present, the inappropriable also divides identity against itself, and thereby sets in motion its economising and calculative exchange-gifting in the first

place. Thus reconstituted, the unpossessable is a dominant theme in Derrida's reading of Mauss: *Donner le temps* is framed by reference to it in the form of the enigma of a 'giving of what one does not have'. Both Lacan and especially Heidegger, but also Madame de Maintenon (discussed in the epigraph) speak of such a paradoxical gift, cited at the opening and the end of the book (2-3n2, 159n28), as well as in the middle (48, 69n23).¹⁸ Being a recipient herself, a donor gives a gift neither she nor the recipient can have or take. Despite the appropriation, the thing remains beset by a future beyond the grasp of the present. The duty to return the gift is then a 'duty beyond duty', an indebtedness (62) without debt (13, 69, 156) and without reciprocity (12).

This concept of the gift may account for on-going socialisation, but it cannot give a firm 'bedrock' to social relations. With this reference to foundations, we return to the issue of nature.

The 'gift of nature' in Derrida

While we have seen a few common themes in Mauss's and Derrida's treatments of the gift, notably that of the unpossessable, a strong criticism is reserved for Mauss's alleged foundationalism and the role of a circular return to archaic origins and to nature. While *différance* may be seen to bolster Mauss's argument regarding the 'spirit' that the donor imparts to the thing, and that the recipient cannot just take or have, and so must pass on to others, a differing-deferring spectre will not return to any origin. Rather, the 'origin' becomes a temporalising spacing-out among elements

whose differentiations can only be traced in their effects, without the traces ever hitting rock bottom. To be sure, given that *différance* can only operate in and through histories and contexts, we can seek to trace gifts to their donors. But within every identified source (this or that ancestor, say, or this or that territory), there is an untraceable, unidentifiable force at work that multiplies the genealogies and opens them to contestation. An inheritance can have a hold on donors only to the extent that they cannot exhaust the inheritance, leaving a future to be read by others.

That is why we are not surprised to find Derrida, exasperated and perhaps a bit wearied, teasing out Mauss's references to archaic origins, circular returns and nature:

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 [*Le don de la nature, il faut le prendre et l'apprendre.*] From giving nature, one must learn to give, in a manner that is both generous and ordered; and by giving as nature says one must give, one will give it back its due, one will show oneself to be worthy, one will mark the right equivalence [...] Archaic society, the archaic, or the originary in general can be replaced by *anything whatsoever* (by X or by Chi), by nature, the mother, father, creator, supreme being, prime mover, *logos*, masculine or feminine possessor

of the *phallus*: One will always find again the same schema. (66; *Donner le temps*, 90; this schema is also called 'Rousseauist' a bit earlier on the same page, and attributed to both Mauss and Lévi-Strauss)

The text goes on to interrogate the links among normativity (*il faut*), the equivalence of reciprocity (with nature and among humans), and natural necessity. The links amount to the idea, so fundamental in Western political theory and economy, that it is natural to 'give back what one owes', as the first definition of justice in Plato's *Republic* puts it.¹⁹ Derrida's provisional conclusion suggests that it is precisely the *il faut*, despite the ineradicable temptation to lead it back to nature, or otherwise make it a regress-stopper, that marks an excess over natural and circular equivalence. This excess permits the gift an escape from the circularity of debt and restitution, but also exposes it to counterfeiting and fiction; whence the further discussion of Baudelaire's short story of the counterfeit coin given to a beggar.

Rather than focus on that discussion, I would like to ask in conclusion whether we are not missing something when we associate the references to nature exclusively with circularity and foundationalism. I will argue that the indeed problematic nature of the Rousseauist (or Hobbesian, or Lockean) naturalism, and the many attempts to derive the social contract from the state of nature, should not lead us to overlook the role of the 'natural' in gifts. As we have seen, in Mauss's reading of the indigenous, nature also names, beyond the desire for the origin, the unpossessable elemental that turns and re-turns, non-cyclically, in all gifts. Is there any room for this 'natural' unpossessable in Derrida? Let us pursue this question by asking why Derrida appears to privilege the deferral of the time that it takes to give

a gift over the spacing that seems equally required. I detect this privilege not only in the title of the book (*Given Time*) but also in the passages in which Derrida tries to show that *différance* is already at work in Mauss's text, and not just imposed, in a heavy-handed manner, from without.

To be sure, *différance* is not a master concept and does not govern discourses from a removed, context-transcendent meta-level. Hence, its effects can only be traced in the issue and texts at hand. In this context, the issue is the thinking of the gift in Mauss, where it is said that giving takes time. If the gift was returned right away, no giving would have taken place (*The Gift*, 45-6). As Derrida comments, 'the gift only gives to the extent it gives time [...] The gift gives, demands, and takes time' (*Given Time*, 41). The quotation marks that Mauss in some places puts around the word 'time' are read by Derrida as an indication of the anthropologist's awareness that 'beneath the word time, it is no doubt a matter, in the homogeneous element of chronology, of a more complex and qualitatively more heterogeneous structure of delay, of interval, of maturation, or of difference' (39). Derrida then underscores the relation between *différance*, time, and gift, glossing the former as "'time," "term," "delay," "interval" of temporization, the becoming-temporization of temporalization' (40).

This gloss inevitably recalls the account in the 1968 eponymous essay to which Derrida refers later in *Given Time* (127). In the earlier essay, we read that *différance* is to be thought as a 'temporization [that] is also temporalization and spacing, the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time, the "originary constitution" of time and space' (*Margins*, 8). Time cannot be thought independently

of a spacing that refers temporalisation to necessarily material, spatial contexts; there is no time as such. In the contemporaneous 'Ousia and Grammē' (also in *Margins of Philosophy*), Derrida examines the spatial metaphors the history of philosophy uses to describe time (point, line, plane and, in particular, circle) and deconstructs the priority Heidegger's *Being and Time* grants to Dasein's temporalisation over its spatiality. Heidegger, however, retracted this priority in his later "On Time and Being",²⁰ the very text on which Derrida's *Given Time* draws to show that a gift can only be thought as different from exchange if related to Heidegger's gift of being, for the non-subjective forgetting and self-withdrawal of the ontological gift allows gifts to be given without full recognition and return by donor and recipient (20-24). Heidegger suggests that the gift of being be figured as a *Zeitspielraum*, literally, a time-play-space or temporal leeway in which being gives beings to presence. It is being as 'time-space' (Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, 14, 16, 20-1) that enables any coming to presence, including the giving of presents and the making present of gifts.²¹

It seems to me that, in the published portion of Derrida's reading of Mauss, this spacing recedes in favour of the gift of time. As mentioned, the strategic-contextual reasons for this may be found in Mauss's text itself, but that text also, as we saw earlier, underlines the role of natural elements—the forest, the land, the earth, the sea, the animals—in the 'spirit' that the donor's context transfers to the recipient's, and that neither of them can fully make their own. In the reading of Mauss, these references to natural elements come under the stricture of a cyclical foundationalism and the 'Rousseauist schema' (66). However, if Mauss's time of

giving is read in terms of an unpossessable *différance*, which articulates the spacing of time and the temporising of space, then we would expect Mauss's *space of giving* to resurface in Derrida's interpretation. This space, as we saw, especially in its ultimately unpossessable, spectral dimension, is discussed as the native soil, the forest and its birds, the sea and the earth.

One may object that Derrida's spacing is not yet (physical) space, and certainly not anything we might call nature, land, sea or earth. Spacing, however, does require elements that it spaces out and thereby temporises, whether these be linguistic graphemes or phonemes, mathematical symbols, biological DNA, living organisms, human identities or physical things.²² According to Derrida's argument, in its very spacing *différance* permits the formation of the oppositions that feed logocentrist discourses, including the vexed oppositions between nature and culture and the physical and the mental (*Margins*, 17). But in its temporising of space, *différance* also defers these oppositions, that is, it undermines their settling into binary dichotomies. The gift of *différance* is neither natural nor unnatural, precisely because *différance* is neither pure space nor pure time. Every gift gives time in being given time (by being or by *différance*), a time whose 'moments' are spaced out by a 'spacing' without which there could not be any gift (*Given Time*, 122). As Derrida underlines in the reading of Baudelaire's story on the counterfeit coin given to a beggar, if there was no unmasterable 'distance' or 'step' between donor and recipient, there could be no gift-relation across that distance (122). Despite the fact that Mauss notes such distance by stressing that the sociality established by giving is always more or less antagonistic (Mauss, 8, 45), in Derrida's reading of Mauss, the

spacing of time and the timing of space are not related back to indigenous accounts of the gift as proceeding from the space of giving and the 'spirit' of the forest and its birds.

But perhaps the space of the gift *is* referred to nature after all, just not in the reading of Mauss but in the reading of Baudelaire's short story. There, Derrida's emphasis on the possible fictitiousness of the gift—a gift qua gift must be unforeseeable, so possibly counterfeit—leads him to a discussion of fortune, chance and nature. If a gift requires an intentional subject who intends to give, but the very intention also returns some gift to her (for she congratulates herself for the gift, consciously or unconsciously), thereby annulling the gift as gift, then one way in which *différance* can help make the gift possible is by introducing chance and fortune, even if these are 're-intentionalized' (133). The fate of the counterfeit coin in the hands of the beggar is unforeseeable, and the encounter between the friends and the beggar is by chance. It is also an accident that the friends happen to have coins to spare, that they were *born* into sufficient wealth, and so on. This relation between what is given at birth and the aleatory is what Derrida comes to call fortune as nature (126). He recalls the relation between gift and nature prevalent both in premodern societies (nature as donor to which everything returns) and in the 'Cartesian epoch' (nature as the given, the order of natural necessities opposed to history and culture) (127). Alluding to Heidegger's interpretation of the pre-Socratic *physis*, he associates the latter with nature as 'the donation of what gives birth, the originary productivity that engenders, causes to grow or increase, brings to light and flowering [*fait pousser ou croître, porte au jour et à l'épanouissement*]'. In

this giving nature, 'fortune (fate, chance, luck, *fors*, fortuity) and necessity are not opposed' (128; *Donner le temps*, 163).

In giving us this nature to think, and beyond Baudelaire's own diatribes against modern progress and what he called 'Americanization' (130), the short story leaves us with 'both a physical and an ethical question', a question whose full quasi-ontological and environmental-ethical import we should not overlook today: 'How is one to behave with regard to this originary productivity, chance and necessity of donating nature [*la nature donatrice*]?' (128).

We should revisit this understanding of nature on the reading of Mauss. Mixed in with the layers of his text that present themselves as foundationalist with respect to nature and archeo-teleological with respect to history, the reading of *The Gift* in terms of *différance* would re-discover in every gift a differential nature characterised by a productivity that gives while also withholding from appropriation and mastery. Donors and recipients find themselves born into its vagaries, their appropriations of it hovering between intentional planning and fearful contingency. While it necessarily precedes gifts and the social relations they establish, this nature also exceeds them precisely by its fortuity and withdrawal. Understood in neither a pre-modern nor a post-Cartesian way, nature is a possible name for the context in which alone subjectivities, human and non-human, can come to affirm themselves. While selves cannot be entirely removed from nature, their iterated ex-appropriations and futural recontextualisations cannot but seek independence from it. Hence, we may say, the ineradicable fear of being devoured alive by the animals, the earth or the sea.²³ Hence, also, the attempt to stay

sovereign in the face of nature, for instance by seeking mastery over the elements—‘knowledge itself is power’, Bacon said²⁴—or by seeking to avert or defer the return of one’s corpse to the earth or the sea. Much is at stake in how we respond to a fear-inspiring nature into which we are given over by the unpossessable and finite time-space of *différance*. Not the least question with respect to the ‘gift of nature’ may thus be: ‘What is it to make a gift of a corpse?’²⁵

Notes

¹ Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, Aldine, 1972), 149, 169.

² Sahlins, 174. The reference is to the C.B. MacPherson who chastises liberal political theory, especially the social-contract doctrine from Hobbes to Locke, for its ‘possessive individualism’, that is, the conception of individuals as sole proprietors of their talents and wealth, owing nothing to society for them. Note that Sahlins, like Derrida after him (though for different reasons), detects more of Rousseau than of Hobbes in Mauss’s account of socialisation: ‘if in giving one gives himself (*hau*), then everyone spiritually becomes a member of everyone else. In other words, the gift approaches even in its enigmas that celebrated contract [of Rousseau rather than Hobbes] in which, “Chacun de nous met en commun sa personne et toute sa puissance sous la suprême direction de la volonté générale; et nous recevons en corps chaque membre comme partie indivisible du tout.” (171).

³ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by W.D. Halls (London, Routledge, 2002), 16, 5.

⁴ Proof of the continuing power of Mauss's work on the gift may be gleaned from studying the work of the so-called M.A.U.S.S. group of French scholars (*Mouvement anti-utilitariste dans les sciences sociales*) and their *Revue du MAUSS* (see www.revuedumauss.com). For an overview of the reception of Mauss, see *WestEnd* 2010, 7:1, 63-132, including essays by Marcel Hénaff and Axel Honneth.

⁵ Mauss, *The Gift*, 15. As with Derrida's texts, I cite the French only when I depart from the translation used, or indicate the original text in parentheses. The French original I use is *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, *l'Année Sociologique*, seconde série, 1923-1924, as reconstituted at http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques_des_sciences_sociales/index.html, here p. 16.

⁶ Although Mauss does not hide the fact that in most of the societies studied, it is only men who can serve as representative of the clan and so have the power to give, I will often use gender-neutral language or indeed feminine pronouns to characterise donor and recipient. For some excellent discussion of the frequently overlooked role of women in accounts of gift-giving practices, see Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988) and *Women and the Gift*, edited by Morny Joy (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2013). Derrida discusses women and the gift, with principal reference to Nietzsche, in his *Spurs*, translated Barbara Harlow (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, translated by Felicity Baker (London, Routledge, 1987 [1950]), 49 ff. In anticipation, I note that Derrida rejects Lévi-Strauss's simple removal of the *hau* and the 'spirit' or 'power' of the thing itself, for this removal leaves us with mere exchange, without the promise of the gift (*Given Time* 74-7).

⁸ In an earlier essay (1902) Mauss generalises the idea of '*mana*' as a spiritual life force across all archaic cultures, thus as a universal origin of human society (Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, translated by Rober Brain [London, Routledge, 1972]). This claim received the criticism of illicit generalisation, e.g. by the famous historian of religion Mircea Eliade in his *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 22, and *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (Magnolia, Mass., Peter Smith, 1992), 127. Marcel Hénaff has recently criticised Derrida's reading of Mauss for allegedly taking over this illicit universalisation in his 'The Aporia of Pure Giving and the Aim of Reciprocity: On Derrida's *Given Time*' in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, edited by Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (Durham, Duke University Press, 2009). I defend Derrida in my 'Deconstructive Aporias: Both Quasi-Transcendental and Normative', *Continental Philosophy Review* 44:4 (2011), 439-468.

⁹ David Graeber, *Toward An Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York, Palgrave, 2001), 179.

¹⁰ For a good overview, see Graeber, chapter 6, especially 163-83; the translation of 'hau' as 'natural generativity' is to be found on p. 177.

¹¹ Annette Weiner's notion of the 'inalienable'—that aspect of a gift that still belongs to the giver even after having been given away—may come closest to what I mean by the unpossessable, though of course it stresses continuing possession; Weiner, *Inalienable Possession: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992). More broadly, one may of course say that any account that stresses indigenous respect for the superior power of the gods of nature and the dead stresses the unpossessable in gifts; especially in view of Derrida's reading, the task would then be to single out this inappropriability in the return-obligation.

¹² Strathern's concept, in *The Gender of the Gift*, of the 'partible person' or 'dividual' may be the best attempt to account for this aspect of Melanesian self-understanding.

¹³ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*. See Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, translated by W.R. Trask. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954).

¹⁴ Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), 20, note 10. A fuller study of the gift in Derrida should consult his seminar of the year 1977-78, from which *Given Time* is drawn (ix).

¹⁵ Derrida, "Différance" *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982), 8; *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris, Minuit, 1972), 8; see also Derrida, *Rogues*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 34 ff.

¹⁶ For instance, Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, translated by George Collins (London, Verso, 1997), 47, 81.

¹⁷ As Derrida puts it elsewhere, 'Only a finite being inherits, and his finitude obliges him. It obliges him to receive what is larger and older and more powerful and more durable than he' (Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue*, translated by Jeff Fort [Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004], 5).

¹⁸ Cf. also Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York, Routledge, 1994), 26. In both *Specters* and *Given Time* (159n28), Derrida refers the idea of giving of what one does not have to Heidegger's account of the relation between time and justice in 'Anaximander's Saying'; see Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Famously, Socrates refutes Cephalus' claim that justice is 'giving back what one has taken from another' by the counter-example of having received a weapon from a friend who has gone mad in the meantime (331c; *Plato's Republic*, 2d edition, translated by Allan Bloom [New York: Basic Books, 1991], 7). Had the old man Cephalus not simply given up life at that point to hand over his *logos* (his wealth as well as his argument) to his son Polemarchus, he could have responded by correcting the assumption that the gun is owed to the *same* person. A careful reading of the passage would thus trouble the idea of equivalence and the distinction between direct and indirect reciprocity by insisting that people change over time, in a time that is finite and mortal.

²⁰ Heidegger writes, 'The attempt in *Being and Time*, section 70, to derive human spatiality from temporality is untenable'. (*On Time and Being*, translated by Joan Stambaugh, New York: Harper and Row, 1972, p. 23).

²¹ Highly relevant in this context would be Luce Irigaray's re-reading of Heidegger's 'es gibt Sein' ('it gives/there is being') as 'elle donne—d'abord—l'air' ('she [mother, woman, nature] first gives air') in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, translated by Mary Beth Mader (Austin, University of Texas Press), 28.

²² In fact, the passage from 'Différance' just cited continues by distancing *différance* as temporisation-spacing from Husserl's account: 'the "originary constitution" of time and space, as metaphysics or transcendental phenomenology would say, to use the language that here is criticized and displaced' (*Margins*, 8). The displacement consists precisely in questioning the division between an originary or transcendental level and its merely empirical manifestations, a gesture that Derrida called 'ultra-transcendental' in *Of Grammatology* (translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976], 61), and, later, 'quasi-transcendental'. *Given Time*, too, questions the 'transcendental givenness' of conditions of (empirical) giving (52-3). For more on the quasi-transcendental, permit me to refer again to my 'Deconstructive Aporias: Both Quasi-Transcendental and Normative'.

²³ Derrida explored this fear most extensively in his final seminar, now published as the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011). Much of the seminar is devoted to Robinson Crusoe's fear that the animals, cannibalistic savages, the earth,

or the sea will swallow him alive. Derrida also discusses attempts at human sovereignty in relation to the decision regarding the inhumation or cremation of one's future corpse.

²⁴ *The Works of Francis Bacon*, edited by James Spedding et al., 15 vols. (Boston, Brown, 1860-1864), volume 14, 95. It would be useful in this context to consider Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's analysis of this famous claim, made at the beginning of the modern epoch (1597), in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002 [1947]).

²⁵ Derrida, *Glas*, translated by John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 143.