

GIFT-GIVING AND ALTRUISM : DECONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE RATIONALE FOR INDIVIDUAL OPTIMIZATION ¹ .

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Introduction

Economics uses a peculiar postulate called “individual optimization,” which says that people choose their actions in life by selecting a best element within some set of admissible possibilities. Economics is constantly being criticized for using this postulate because, as many sociologists and philosophers claim, it hinges on a view of the individual as self-enclosed and as constitutively unable to act non-self-interestedly. This, the critics claim, comes from the philosophical heritage which economics carries, and which makes it unable to accept two crucial elements : social norms of “gift-giving” and the intrusion of “otherness.”

The aim of this paper is to discuss this crucial metaphysical aspect of the economic theory of individual optimization. The theoretical works of a sociologist, Marcel Mauss, and a philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, will be used not as material for sterile exegesis, but as a particularly meaningful occasion to shed light on the issue of whether economic theory is indeed intrinsically confined to the modelling of self-centered agents—even when the agents so modelled are claimed by the theorist to be “altruists”—, or whether it is able to really model non-self-centered action—supposing we can make sense of this “really.” On the basis of a discussion of the relative virtues of an ethics of gift-giving (Mauss) and an ethics of other-oriented subjectivity (Levinas), I want to make two claims : yes, economic theory can legitimately use the *postulate* of individual optimization to model altruism ; however, the *content* of the optimization operation must be radically reformulated. The debate will turn on the essential question of how a theory of *freely accepted obligation towards others* can be constructed within a methodologically individualistic framework such as that of economics.

When I first came into contact with Marcel Mauss’s (1924) ideas on gift-giving and “generosity,” I was seduced by the prophetic tone of his writing. Something, he claims, has been lost in the passage to modern society, and somewhat in the fashion of the Heideggerian individual who has let himself be overtaken by *Seins-Vergessenheit*, the forgetfulness of Being, we have succumbed to

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Gaben-Vergessenheit, the forgetfulness of gift-giving. We need to recover our deep-rooted tendencies for giving, Mauss says, because this tendency is the only one that can save social cohesion. Located somewhere between the heavy, “top-down” social determinism of Durkheim and the “bottom-up” approach of methodological individualism, Mauss’s analysis of the archaic structures of the gift is an attempt to reconstruct social cohesion by uncovering the combination of obligation and freedom which underlies the chain of gifts and counter-gifts found in primitive and ancient societies. Receiving, giving and reciprocating gifts is a triad rooted, so Mauss claims, in *a free acceptance of obligation*... One might say, at the risk of oversimplifying, that Mauss has attempted to make ethnology into an axiological discipline (i.e., ethnological findings as sources of renewal of our own modern social practices) by bringing a kind of Kantian morality into Durkheimian determinism: gift-giving in its triadic structure appears in Mauss’s work as a response to a “command” which overtakes the individual as a moral imperative *but at the same time* is translated into apparently free decisions.

French-speaking disciples and adversaries of Mauss have long been engaged in a fierce debate on the potentialities of the gift/counter-gift scheme for social organization. My feeling is that Pierre Bourdieu’s (1982) analysis of gifts, which he conducts in terms of a temporal sequence of “seemingly free” and “disconnected” acts separated by time lapses that are long enough for each individual agent to “forget” the massive, overriding social obligation to which he is unwittingly obeying, is an excellent starting point for the debate on Mauss. The reason is that Bourdieu has resisted any romantic inclination towards imagining a “gift society” which, somewhat in the manner of Rousseau’s small-scale community draws its cohesion from mutual friendship, would draw its deep cohesion from a “revival” of forgotten gift practices. (The recent history of rock music has shown us that revivals of old bands might be conducive to surges of nostalgia, but rarely to good music.) Bourdieu’s claim is, rather, in a positivistic vein: in some societies there is a so-called *habitus*, or set of habitual schemes of behavior and of attitudes, which leads people in spite of themselves, i.e., without any *conscious* decision making, to give, receive and reciprocate. The Durkheimian resurgence here is evident: what an individual will *believe* to be a free decision (“I shall give him/her this object as a gift”) is *in fact* a socially conditioned action—we are all subject to a *common miscognition* (as opposed to common knowledge; see Bourdieu 1989: 181-183, 1997: 229-230) which leads us collectively to forget the overriding norm into which we unwittingly inscribe our actions.

While Bourdieu’s analysis certainly is not exempt of problems, it has the merit of taking the wind out of the somewhat naive endorsement by some (e.g., Alain Caillé’s numerous discussions of Mauss and the purported “generality” of gift-giving; see Caillé 1994) of the Maussian gift triad as some “nice” social norm which could replace the “bad” self-interested modes of behavior which characterize modern societies. Thanks to Bourdieu, and even though it will become clear that I ultimately disagree with his analysis of socially inscribed action, I have been able to avoid the adolescent seduction exercised by Mauss’s grand prophetic tone about “recovering generosity,”

in the last twenty pages of his essay. Much more cautiously than Mauss himself, Bourdieu stays away from normative conclusions *to the extent that the gift triad in fact might be motivated by the very opposite of “generosity.”* In a previous paper (Arnsperger 1998*b*), I listed passages from Mauss’s essay where it becomes clear that, while indeed the social norm which underlies the gift triad in archaic and ancient societies is a norm of “social cohesion,” this norm is certainly *not* based on generosity or a respect of other human beings. Rather, the gift triad is a more or less moderate version of the agonistic *kula ring* practice, in which communities (not individuals—and Mauss is adamant that his theory is not recuperable on the individual level) engage in rivalry to symbolically enslave the opponent by crushing him under the weight of an excessive gift, with the reaction sometimes being that the opponent destroys the gift ostensibly so as to be rid of the debt. This, Mauss claims explicitly, is what still goes on nowadays in many of our so-called modern social practices—and who could deny this, indeed (there are many economic analyses of gift practices within communities, work relationships in the Akerlof 1982 “gift exchange” scheme, etc.)? What I find utterly puzzling, however, is the way in which Mauss *militates* in favor of a revival of such practices, of an extension of them, so as to counteract what he (along with some of his more misguided followers) views as the danger of an hegemony of “self-interest.”

1. The unsatisfactory character of Maussian gift-giving

Mauss does not deny that the majority of gift practices, in addition to relying on a collective “social lie” (*mensonge social*), are in fact motivated by hidden economic interests. He insists, however, on the observation that the kind of “interest” which leads communities into the potentially endless sequence of gifts and counter-gifts (an endlessness and open-endedness which Bourdieu has shown to be in fact completely crucial) is *not like what in modern societies we call interest*. This is certainly true in the sense that with the advent of industrial capitalism and the increasing division of tasks in society, atomized decision making has largely replaced what Mauss calls “total social acts,” namely, actions and attitudes oriented (on this he insists, too) towards the preservation of a community, whether it be a family clan, a village, a tribe, etc. But again, the puzzle is why we should follow Mauss in his apparent *preference* for this latter mode of social organization: personally, and even though I have very strong misgivings about the increasing atomization of our society and the ever expanding realm of competitive warfare, I would not like to give up the present way of life *if the alternative were a revived variant of the kula ring*. While many of us will agree that a society governed by a mindless population of shareholders is not something to be extatic about, I do not think we should be any more extatic about the alternative notion of “interest” which Mauss’s analysis expounds.

To be more specific, I believe it is easy to detect in the current surge of interest in Mauss’s “gift” something similar to what impelled the recent development of communitarian political philosophy. Modernity, it is claimed, has shown its limits because it has led to an atomization of

social links, an isolation of individuals within a sphere of “autonomy” which is too much for them to bear, and so on. It is hard not to find some truth in this diagnosis, but what is also hard is to see how any call to a revival of so-called “community values” will solve the problem. In fact, as Jean-Luc Nancy (1986) has perceptively argued, all philosophies of the “return to (true) meaning” share the flaw of their neglect of philosophy itself in its historical unfolding. Mauss’s confused call for a renewed “generosity,” just like for instance Amitai Etzioni’s (1993) call for a renewed moral order or Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1981) call for a return to Aristotle, seems to forget to ask *why humanity might have wanted to leave these nice things behind*. Of course, there is always a ready and irrefutable answer : moral degeneration, free choice against “the Truth.” All philosophies of the return to (true) meaning are, in that sense, inevitably variants of the doctrine of Original Sin. And Mauss also tells us this : if only we could let go of the evil of self-interest, we could return to the Paradise of the Gift. When in his essay he portrays gift giving as the one eternal wisdom (“*de tout temps il n’y a eu qu’une sagesse*”), he puts both feet into the sticky terrain of natural law...

My option is that there is another ready answer : humanity chose to leave these nice things behind because they were in fact not so nice. Western civilization has given up “total social acts” such as those described by Mauss because they are not made more liveable simply by saying that individuals *appear* to espouse them freely. Bourdieu has put a decisive stop to such artificial contorsions. Modernity has given up the faith in an overarching norm—not because there *are* no such norms (of course there are, today just like yesterday) but because such norms are norms only to the extent that there are individuals who validate them, both politically and transcendently. Modern philosophy from Kant to Husserl is ample proof that post-archaic mentalities have not simply done away with “overarching things,” if I may put it this way. However, the dictate of a never-evident natural law, the perpetual nostalgia of past ideas and practices, has been relayed by more formal, or “procedural,” attitudes which are evidenced all the way from the Kantian metaphysics of the 1790’s to the Husserlian transcendentalism of the 1900’s. As Robert Legros (1993) would put it, reasons for acting now have to pass the test of our common humanity—and while, quite possibly, current economic practices and social isolation might not pass this test, my conviction is that the rivalry-based gift triad of Mauss will not pass it, either.

In short, a reasoned dissatisfaction with the current state of society appears to me no reason at all to look to Mauss as the new prophet of “generosity.” First of all, as I have indicated, it seems difficult to see how Mauss’s analyses, which center on (largely unconscious) agonistic gifts between groups of people, can be “converted” into recommendations for non-agonistic gifts between individuals. Second, and more importantly, his own insistence on gifts and counter-gifts as harboring hidden interests might alert us to the fact that *the structure of gift practices as Mauss envisages them might well be partly responsible for the sorry state of our society*. To take only one example, the Maussian glorification of the *obligation* to reciprocate (i.e., the impossibility to avoid giving back gifts received in the past) is, as far as I can see, one reason why so many individuals today

feel “useless” because they are unemployed or handicapped. In the same vein, André Gorz (1997) has forcefully argued that one of the pernicious features of current post-Fordist capitalism is its ability to silence all worker protest by transforming the firm into a kind of “large family” in which reciprocity *à la* Akerlof creates a constant *and indeterminate* debt towards the employer. So seeing gift-giving as ultimately a sublimation of rivalry may be realistic in some cases (and I am convinced that it is)—but it certainly cannot make the Maussian gift into a vector of deepening social generosity. In fact, to the extent that it is realistic, Mauss’s theory of the gift reconnects with the economics he seeks to criticize. If (as claimed by Caillé 1994 and also by Godbout 1992) it is this generalized gift exchange *under the cover of generalized “generosity”* which is to be seen as a way to foster social cohesion, there turns out to be no more generosity in Maussian individuals than in Hobbesian ones (as Marshall Salins noted long ago) but also than in standard *homo oeconomicus*. Indeed, there appears to be very little *ontological* difference between agents who create perpetual mutual obligations through exchange of gifts through time and agents who generate a Pareto optimum through production and exchange of goods on perfectly competitive markets. Stripped of its romanticism, Mauss’s theory of the gift triad therefore appears as one more variant of the question of whether self-interested individuals can unwittingly generate social order. True enough, the notion of utility maximization has been replaced by that of obeying the (implicit) duty to give, receive and reciprocate ; but fundamentally, the logic of the argument is the same : where economists will argue for the establishment of conditions such that individuals making decentralized decisions can generate a Pareto optimum, Mauss will argue for the maintenance of a set of rivalry-disguised-as-generosity practices such that society can perpetuate itself. The important feature is that in both cases, supposedly “natural,” rivalry-producing features of human character (competitive profit and utility seeking in one case, competitive symbolic-profit seeking in the other) are *instrumentalized* to lead to what is considered to be a social optimum.

In fact, both aspects might very well be viewed as reinforcing one another, with individuals acting as utility and profit maximizers on the market while using gift exchange whenever necessary to stabilize existing social hierarchies (Mauss, an anti-bolchevik socialist, mentions the necessity to pay workers sufficient wages not so much to advance distributive justice as to avoid discontent and loss of motivation)—and in that sense, as I argued already in Arnsperger (1998*b*), I think Mauss’s vision of society is deeply marked (like it or not) by turn-of-the-century industrial paternalism. What seems clear to me is that, while his theory of gifts is not in any sense *anti-social*, it fares no better in the end than standard economics (or, for that matter, Axelrod-type evolutionary games ; see Axelrod 1984) when it comes to accounting for apparent generosity and altruism in individual action.

2. “We” motives versus other “non-I” motives

Now, this may not be saddening for many ; they will simply note that, as my discussion of Mauss confirms, self-interest is indeed the *archè* of social science, and the *telos* of modern society can only be viewed as the “optimal” combination of individual interests—nothing very new here. And as skeptical as I am towards individualistic reductionism, I have to confess that I am taking stock more and more of the depth of the roots it has acquired in modern thinking. Mauss, I have argued, cannot despite all his and his followers’ claims to the contrary, help us in answering affirmatively the crucial question : is any true altruism possible ? Immediately, I realize how misplaced the word “true” appears here : are we going to go for another round of seeking the “really real” ground of human action ? (This is also what Mauss claimed to be doing when he called gift exchange the “one of the bedrocks” of humanity.) Well, strange as it may sound, I do believe that yes, we cannot avoid this question, and we cannot avoid asking it again and again : what is the *ground* of human action and motivation ? This is, let us say, our “metaphysical horizon” in the human and social sciences ; this is what we are here for—not only to uncover the *ground* of human motivation, but also to say something about the implications it has for the organization of society. There should therefore be no misunderstanding : although I have shown Mauss to be deficient, I *fully sympathize* with his basic endeavor of uncovering human bedrocks. It is just that I think he has uncovered nothing but another version of the Hobbesian-Lockean vision of society as a mutually beneficial social contract—although, I hasten to admit, a rather more sophisticated version of it, since the sequence of gifts and counter-gifts is inscribed within a symbolic space which no individual has instituted, and which serves as the motivating cause of people’s gift acts. “Self-interest” is revealed, in Mauss, as having powerful *non-individual underpinnings*. In other words, what I view as my own best interest is underpinned by something which does not come from “me.”

By saying this I am putting the finger on what I believe to be the truly interesting feature in Mauss’s analysis, namely that he saw (to put it in Bourdieu’s terms) the importance of *habitus* in explaining human motivations. This, I think, opens up a debate which vastly outgrows the narrow discussion of Mauss : it is the debate about *whether economics (but also sociology) as it is currently practiced is in any way able to account for “non-I” motivations which are not “we” motivations, either*. In other words, does my rejection on modern grounds of the Durkheim-Mauss primacy of the “social” (the “we”) in individual motivation necessarily entail what is usually objected to economics, namely its focus on atomistic subjects who behave like monads without *any* social horizon ? To harden the issue somewhat, it seems that social science in general is at a difficult junction : we are apparently asked to choose between top-down sociological determinism where the “we” shapes individual action and the bottom-up economic determinism (helped in this by the phenomenological and transcendental disciplines) where the social is only an epiphenomenon of the “I.” The question is certainly not new *per se*, but it seems to take on a new color when seen through the light of my previous discussion : the difficulties thrown up by Mauss’s failed attempt

to account for social determinations while not relinquishing individual freedom compel us to ask whether such an enterprise is even possible.

The question, of course, is a huge one. It is part of the whole debate about whether or not modernity can turn atomism into something positive ; among the philosophers, there are those like Charles Taylor (1991) who answer negatively, and those like Gianni Vattimo (1990) who answer affirmatively. Economists have generally shown little or no interest in the issue ; this, I think, has mainly done disservice to economics because it has allowed a wholesale criticism (very common, incidentally, among Mauss's followers, although the reasons for this should now seem a bit mysterious) of economics as a science of the a-social ego. To what extent this is true is what I want to investigate here. The focus will be on the modelling of "altruism" because it is totally obvious that nothing in the so-called economic method dictates any restriction to cases where each individual would be an egoist, i.e., would care only for *his own bundle of "things"* (those who still need to be convinced of this trivial point can consult Arnsperger, 1997*a* and 1998*a*). But while rejecting egoism is trivial, challenging *egotism* (in the sense of a primacy of the ego) is rather more difficult ; I will argue in a very simple two-agent framework that by its very structure economics implicitly makes the assumption that there is something like a "transcendental ego" in the sense of Husserl, but that the transcendental, egotistic (as opposed to egoistic) substrate which is inherent in the economist's treatment of the individual subject does not exclude "true" altruism—in fact, by espousing a version of Emmanuel Levinas's (1991) "non-intentional consciousness," economics can remain a discipline of individual optimization while at the same time *working with individual subjects who act on "non-I" motives which are radically distinct from mere "we" motives of the Mauss-Durkheim type.*

The "non-I" which is not the "we" is the "Other" : this, very roughly, is the message of Levinas which has both radically influenced, and been nourished by, the whole post-modern reflexion on a non-naive articulation of self and community. Levinas professes what I would call a "methodological altruism," the expression being taken as a full-fledged parallel to what economists know as methodological individualism : his whole method of analysis, including his claims about social relations, is built on the primacy of the Other. This comes from the fact that Levinas really combines two features, namely the individualism inherited from classical phenomenology—there is no social structure "above" individuals (see Lyotard, 1986 : 84-85)—and the altruism that comes from his own phenomenology of radical individual responsibility. So methodological altruism consists in giving methodological priority to the individual, just like methodological individualism, but to the individual "other" instead of the individual "I"—more precisely, to the individual "other" to the extent that he *precedes* the individual "I" in the constitution of this very "I." This perhaps rather obscure formulation will be clarified below and, as we shall see, it will have fairly radical consequences for the way economics ought to model individual optimizing behavior.

3. Optimizing behavior and radical altruism

As a preliminary precaution, especially towards those who know Levinas's work in some detail, I need to emphasize that taken in its full radicality, Levinas's ethical positions are simply impossible to integrate into economics. I have addressed this question in detail elsewhere (see Arnsperger and Serzec 1998), but it needs to be made explicit here. Especially in the "excessive" pieces which included and followed *Otherwise than Being* (Levinas 1974), Levinas takes such extreme positions about the priority of the Other over the Ego—going all the way to analogies between altruism and "obsession," and between altruism and "substitution"—that any social scientist is apt to fall into despair because *anything* the social sciences try to say about altruism, gifts, and the like will *necessarily* fall short of the impossible ethical task seemingly set by these excessive writings. (For a reasoned, rather than illuminated, reading of the excess of "hyperbolic" justice in Levinas's work see Caputo, 1993a.) However, my own stance is that such extremism should not deter us from pushing Levinas's logic *as far as it will get us* within the framework of social science, and economics in particular. The reason is that, outside of these excesses which I personally find aesthetic and somewhat sterile, I believe Levinas's methodological altruism has much to teach social scientists about the limits and the potential of their own methodologically individualistic method. As I will show, it is possible to envisage a society steered mainly by generosity, and hence to be just as "prophetic" (some will say unrealistic, but it is a risk I am willing to take) as Mauss intended to be—but the Maussian notion of gift exchange will have to be replaced by a notion of "other-guided action" inherited from Levinasian ethics. And this, I will claim, can be carried out still within a framework of individual optimization, though a substantially modified one.

Suppose a two-agent world. A crucial assumption is that we will be working with instantaneous, non-intertemporal situations. Note $i, j \in \{1, 2\}$ the two agents alternatively, with $i \neq j$. There are two kinds of actions: acting for oneself, and giving to the other. A self-oriented act by agent i is denoted a_i whereas a gift to j is denoted a_i^j . It is natural then to write the two agents' levels of welfare as follows: $u_1 = u_1(a_1, a_2^1)$ and $u_2 = u_2(a_2, a_1^2)$, with strictly positive partial derivatives in all arguments. This is already a Levinasian, and not a Maussian assumption, since in Mauss's model of the gift it may be the case, depending on the social relation which exists between i and j , that for instance i 's utility is decreasing in j 's gift but that i has no possibility of refusing the gift because given the prevailing social conventions his "symbolic utility" might decrease very sharply as a result of this refusal.

More precisely, suppose each agent k has a certain quantity of resource Ω_k available to allocate between self-use and gifts; it is then the case that $u_1 = u_1(a_1, \Omega_2 - a_2^1)$ and $u_2 = u_2(a_2, \Omega_1 - a_1^2)$. Nothing so far gives any hint about the agents' possible degree of altruism. Let us focus on agent 1, and let us introduce an objective function \leftarrow_1 which is potentially (but not necessarily) distinct from the more narrow utility function. He is an egoist in the usual sense simply if $\leftarrow_1 = f_1(u_1)$

and if he applies the program $\max_{a_1 \leq \Omega_1} \leftarrow_1$. In this case, if agent 2 behaves symmetrically, we will trivially end up with $\leftarrow_1 = \Omega_1$ and $\leftarrow_2 = \Omega_2$, that is, the total absence of gifts which Mauss identified as the plague of modern “self-interest.” But, to echo what I indicated earlier, Mauss’s modern-day followers who criticize the economic method by confusing *methodological* individualism with *empirical* selfishness are deeply wrong: nothing in the standard economic method compels us to make this particular assumption. We can introduce altruism simply by assuming, instead, that $\leftarrow_1 = g_1(u_1, u_2)$, with positive partial derivatives for both variables. If for instance $\leftarrow_1 = \alpha_1 u_1 + (1 - \alpha_1) u_2$, agent 1 will substitute gift for self-use up to the point where $-u_1 / -a_1 = -u_2 / -a_2$ for a given level of \leftarrow_2 . The model could be made substantially more complicated by assuming more general, non-linear objective functions, Nash and other equilibria could be analyzed, etc. But my aim here is essentially methodological: can this model generate an acceptable theory of gift-giving?

Let us call *radical altruism* the case where

$$(1) \quad \leftarrow_1 = u_2,$$

that is, the case where, whenever deciding on how to act, agent 1 would adopt as a maxim of behavior the maximization (subject, possibly, to a “survival” restriction in the form, for example, of an upper bound on \leftarrow_1) of agent 2’s utility given \leftarrow_2 . In a two-agent framework, this is obviously the farthest anyone can go in terms of a non-Maussian, or Levinasian, gift. (General n -agent frameworks throw up difficult problems of distributive justice which I shall avoid here. See the second half of Arnsperger 1997a for a detailed discussion.) There is obviously no trace here of any “gift exchange,” since reciprocity is absent: agent 1 acts “in the moment,” and no intertemporal constraint forces agent 2 to give anything back later on. To make this clearer, let us simply index all parts of equation (1) by time. Levinasian gift-giving would then be written as follows:

$$(1') \quad \leftarrow_1(t) = u_2(t) \quad \forall t$$

4. Egoism versus egotism : understanding Levinas correctly

A rather difficult and puzzling question now presents itself: to what extent can the economic method alone *really* account for altruistic behavior? Is there not an *intrinsic selfishness* which would preclude any possibility of calling even equation (1') a truly altruistic rule of behavior? In fact, is not the very notion of a *rule* of behavior a contradiction of altruism? This objection seems totally outlandish for an economist, and but it does indeed flow from Levinas’s own philosophy: the very idea of calculation, even if embodied in equation (1'), presupposes a *transcendental ego*, that is, an Ego who is logically prior to the other person and who has *given himself* rule (1'). “To give something to oneself” has to be taken here in the Husserlian sense, that is, in the sense of a transcendental “act” by which the Ego posits itself in a very fundamental sense as *its own source*. Levinas has always had strong reservations towards this way of seeing the constitution of the self,

because it leads to a vision of the “I” as an *essentially* or *constitutively* (rather than merely psychologically) self-enclosed entity which can be open to otherness only from its own standpoint. For Levinas, once one adopts the transcendental method of Husserl, once escapes psychologism in the understanding of the ego only through a return of another form psychologism in inter-subjective relations: otherness, the world, the people around me, everything “outside” appears as a mere “secondary product” of the Ego. In other words, the Other is never really exterior: it is only Other-when-referred-to-Ego, it is only an *alter ego*, and according to Levinas this destroys its otherness. The implication is that even equation (1') is only a psychological operation by which agent 1 remains unaffected in his quality of a transcendental ego. (For further discussion of this problem, see Arnsperger 1997a and 1997b.)

For Levinas, true altruism is necessarily a reaction to an initial “trauma” (see Levinas 1974) which occurs before any calculation has been carried out, or even projected. Otherness is, in this vision, the contrary of a gift,² and we could even go further: it neither a gift nor a curse, because in fact for Levinas there is no one there to receive either of these—the “I” only becomes an “I” in the moment where the impact of otherness elicits an action. In this sense true altruism is by definition uncalculated—even when by “calculation” we mean something like equation (1') and not cynical, self-centered calculation as its usually understood—and authentic action is by definition *for the other*. Now, it is quite easy to see how quickly this sort of assertion can slip into the excess I was alluding to earlier. Many naive interpreters of Levinas have made his careful analysis of the “pre-initial” impact of otherness into a call for self-sacrifice and self-annihilation—unheeding of the paradox that such recommendations would create, namely, the paradox of a “self” that would be called to voluntarily forget its own existence. If we hold the strongly essentialist view that the very existence of an “I” makes agent 1's altruism inauthentic, we *de facto* paralyze any action: the great risk is that we will become unable to distinguish between an *egoistic* action guided by $\boxed{\leftarrow_1 = u_1}$ and a radically altruistic but, by definition, *egotistic* action guided by $\boxed{\leftarrow_1 = u_2}$: both rely on calculation, and so both spring fundamentally from the same transcendental ego. Ultimately, failing to distinguish egotism from egoism leads to sick theory—and if we were to remain here, there would be no way to offer up Levinas as an interesting—and, as I claim, even necessary—alternative to Mauss and the agonistic vision of the gift.

There is, however, a much more constructive way to read Levinas. One of the healthy readers I have seen is John Caputo (1993b), who shows persuasively that what Levinas has uncovered is a structure of the Ego which is so foundational that in our quality of empirical subjects we are necessarily always “too late” in our responsibility towards others: rather than shoulder a self-contradictory task which only a non-self could shoulder (but where would its shoulders be?), we can only act intentionally on the “trace” which the trauma of otherness has left in the Ego but we can never recover the “purity” of an unmediated response to the pre-intentional shock. In fact,

² I am grateful to Luc Bouckaert of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven for this suggestion, which he submitted to me in discussion at the Leuven conference on *Gifts and Interests*, April 3-4, 1998.

such a pure response is by definition impossible because the upshot of Levinas's analysis of intentionality is that any social existence, that is, any insertion of the individual into a life with others, necessarily entails the *simultaneous* arising of an Ego *and* of this Ego's responsibility towards others. In other words, Levinas's strong contribution is not to have shown that we are always inauthentic because we are never able to be "really" altruistic, but that our very Ego, while necessarily appearing to itself as a transcendental, self-enclosed entity, is always already "wounded" by otherness (see part II of Levinas 1961). The very subject who perceives himself as a monad—and there is no way he could not—is in fact *at the same time* inhabited by "the trace of the Other" (see Levinas 1967). There is therefore no implication of any paralysis: the transcendental Ego and its empirical-psychological phenomenalization as an "I" who is also an "agent" is the only place where the ethical call to radical altruism can be put into practice. Consequently, altruistic calculation and its necessary implementation through intentionality are signs not of inauthenticity, but of finite, empirical situatedness: in this precise sense, methodological individualism is fully compatible with Levinas's ethics, despite initial appearances to the contrary.

Nevertheless, something fundamental has changed which economists should pay careful attention to. *Individualism is upheld but it has been amended by what I earlier called methodological altruism.* Levinas's ethics strongly restricts the range of possible formulations of the individual optimization program because one thing can never be denied: the wound of otherness which the Ego carries inside of it the moment it enters into existence as Ego. So from now on, if we accept the general validity of Levinas's priority of the Other inside the individual "I," only equation (1') or something close to it is ethically admissible. Here Levinas does indeed oppose all forms of psychologism and, more generally, empiricism which have traditionally been associated with methodological individualism: there is a "call of otherness" which we cannot assume away if we, both as philosophers and as social scientists, want to be serious about subjectivity.³ But should we accept the general validity of Levinas's analysis? To persuade us he often appeals to the inevitability not of altruism, but of a *sense of obligation and guilt* which pervades many of our interaction with others. This has, once again, often been turned into caricature by naive interpreters of Levinas (helped greatly by his own abuse of the terminology of clinical psychology; see De Bauw 1997) who have interpreted guilt into a positive and necessary phenomenon. In fact, all Levinas wants to say is that, to use Caputo's (1993*b*) language as borrowed from Lyotard (1983), "obligation happens." We can always choose to circumvent it, and we very often do; the almost inevitable gnawing guilt we feel on such occasions is not a sign

³ To clarify an important but rather technical philosophical point: Husserl too meant to eschew psychologism and empiricism through his transcendental method, but two elements at least of his theory (first the very notion of phenomenological reduction which reduces all phenomena, including the existence of other humans, to components of the ego's flow of consciousness; second the later appeal to the *Lebenswelt* which creates a virtually total identification between the transcendental and the empirical ego) make him dangerously close to a form of psychologism or, at least, of epiphenomenalism where otherness is but a figment of the sameness inherent in the ego.

that we are evil but only a sign that the constitutive wound of otherness which we carry inside has been re-opened. So Levinas recovers the sense of obligation of which Durkheim and Mauss also had the intuition, but rather than locating it in a more or less impersonal social injunction he finds it in a phenomenological analysis of the structure of individual subjectivity.

5. A non-contextual theory of gift-giving

The upshot of this whole discussion is that, after having made sure that the economic theory of individual optimization does not fall prey to Levinas's own criticism, we can now view equation (1') as a fully adequate theory of gift-giving. *If* we are intent on "obeying the command of otherness," as persons but also as social scientists, equation (1') is what we have to go for. We will never quite be up to it, but Levinas's analysis gives us a benchmark.

Is this an exceedingly idealistic theory? Well, it may be, but then again the point of departure of my whole discussion was itself rather idealistic: here we were with members of a community making gifts and counter-gifts to one another with the aim (unbeknownst to them) of nourishing the "social body" of which they are part (see also Karsenti 1994). Strangely enough, however, the only thing they are able to do to tie this society together through time is to engage in intertemporal rivalry. As I noted above, Mauss is in this sense still very much influenced by the social determinism of Durkheim: social norms determine behavior but there is no analysis of the genesis of these norms; as Bourdieu has shown convincingly, the only "freedom" people have in Mauss-type gift relationships (which I am not denying exist) is an illusory one created by time lapses between gift and counter-gift. Assuming that people have this innate sense of the need to preserve social cohesion without being aware of it, that is, assuming that they evolve within a *habitus* which has taken complete possession of them and compels them to a "common miscognition" of the real motivations of their gift-giving actions seems to me no less idealistic than assuming people to have a "wound of otherness" which inscribes in them a *telos* of non-rivalous gift-giving.

True enough, Levinasian gift-giving is founded on a revisitation of transcendental consciousness whereas Mauss-Bourdieu gift-giving is grounded in a contextual set of norms which people have internalized: the first type of gift is an essentialist one whereas the second type is a historically situated one. But to criticize Levinasian gift-giving in this way would be to forget that Mauss himself claims to have uncovered not some historical contingency, but a "bedrock of our humanity." My claim in this paper is that when it comes to bedrocks, Levinas is more inspiring than Mauss because reducing all gift behavior to a disguised interest in symbolic gratification or the like is, as I said above, hardly a progress compared to the Hobbesian-Smithian vision of society. At no point in Levinas's theory is there any nostalgia of a "return to (true)meaning" because, in fact, the kind of ethical attitude towards which he claims we ought to tend has never

fully existed : it is, as Nancy (1986) says about meaning in general, “always ahead of us, always to come.”

Levinas’s ethics is one of the *reaction to events* rather than of the *respect of social norms*. In the simple model I have been discussing here, there is no gift *exchange*. When agent 1 meets agent 2, he acts so as to maximally satisfy the latter’s needs, but if all agents heed the call of otherness sooner or later the reverse is bound to happen as well, that is, at some time t agent 2 will meet agent 1 and apply $\max_{a_2 \leq \Omega_2} \left[\leftarrow_2(t) = u_1(t) \right]$. In Arnsperger (1997a, 1998c), I suggest a generalization of the above two-person case. Suppose there are now n individuals in the society. Individual i considers the process Π which generates all possible sequences of at most $n-1$ people and for each possible sequence $\left[\sigma(i) \right]$ formulates a sequence of objective functions, $\left\{ \leftarrow_{\sigma(i)} \right\} - \left\{ u_k : k \in \sigma(i) \right\}$. Thus, i ’s objective function has a “floating index” which changes with every new encounter. All this embodies, as Derrida (1992, 1994) would say, “calculated reactions” to a series of “incalculable” events because the *source* of the agent’s objective functions is the “wound of otherness” which creates an openness to exteriority—true enough, this openness takes the form of a calculable rule which might appear indistinguishable from an imperative created by moral education (such as “It is of good taste to offer parts of your resources to people you meet” or “By giving your resources away you will earn Heaven”), but it is an openness rooted in the pre-educational, one might say even the pre-social constitution of subjectivity. The openness here is, obviously, essentially different from the open-endedness which Bourdieu (1982) showed to be central in the dynamics of Mauss-type gift-giving : what Bourdieu describes is a collective forgetfulness of the overriding social norm, a forgetfulness which can only perpetuate itself if the gift exchange process is potentially infinite, whereas Levinas has in mind an *ontological, non-instrumental* openness to the “event” of otherness.

To what extent this can be operationalized in terms of social organization is open to debate. In Arnsperger (1997a) and Arnsperger and Serzec (1998) it appears clearly that Levinasian ethics (quite apart from the specific question of gift-giving) is essentially indeterminate. This echoes what I said at the beginning concerning the increasing proceduralization of modern social practice as opposed to natural law. But it is a proceduralization of a very special type, in which there are really no procedures but rather a never-ending *process* of responses of individuals to the radical, irreducible otherness they encounter in other individuals. There is no specific “culture” attached to this ethics (although many have tried to recover Levinas’s Jewish origins), nor is there any specific idea of “community” : Levinas’s agents are deeply individualistic, but in the sense I gave individualism here, namely an individualism propelled by the “other individual”—and this is the only thing which, ontologically binds them. In that sense they may, much more adequately than archaic Melanesians or modern Europeans, correspond to Mauss’s (1924 : 265) own ethical call : “There are no two forms of wisdom. Let us then adopt as a principle of our lives that which has always been a principle and will always be one : to go outside of ourselves, to give, freely and out of obligation ; doing this we can make no mistake.”

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