

The Gift in Theory

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In 1952 Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote a brief article for the French journal *Les Temps Modernes* entitled “Le Père Noël supplicié.”¹ The article recounted recent events in the city of Dijon. Senior churchmen had arranged for an effigy of Father Christmas to be hanged from the railings of Dijon Cathedral and subsequently burnt in public. He had attracted their anger for two related reasons. Father Christmas recalled the ghost of paganism, a refusal to abandon superstition in the face of a (comparatively) enlightened monotheism. But he was also associated with the commercialization of Christmas and the threatened Americanization of post-war French culture. An ecclesiastical communique declared that “Father Christmas has been sacrificed. In truth, the lies about him cannot arouse religious feeling in a child and are in no way a means of education.”² The city council, though, reacted swiftly to the martyrdom of Father Christmas by staging a full resurrection in the town hall at six o’clock the following evening.

This sequence of events provoked little extended reflection amongst contemporary commentators, for whom it served briefly as a human interest story and by whom it was then forgotten. But Lévi-Strauss, despite the brevity of his article, offered a rather more ambitious interpretation of the strength of popular hostility to the execution of Father Christmas.

It is no longer the traditional fear of spirits and ghosts that prevails, but instead a dread of everything death represents, both in itself and in life: degeneration, dessication, and deprivation. We should reflect on the tender care we take of Father Christmas, the

1. The article has been translated as “Father Christmas Executed” in Daniel Miller, ed., *Unwrapping Christmas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 38–51. A draft of the present essay was delivered as a public lecture to the Contemporary Studies Programme at the University of King’s College, Halifax. I should like to thank those who were present on that occasion for their comments, and in particular Bruce Barber, Elizabeth Edwards, Rainer Friedrich, Wayne Hankey, Peggy Heller, Ron Huebert, and Victor Li. My thanks to Fenella Cannell and Keston Sutherland for help and advice. Some parts of this argument have been partially worked out in sections of the following earlier papers: “Tombeau,” *Parataxis: modernism and modern writing* 9 (1996): 144–52; “Wordsworth’s Gifts of Feeling,” *Romanticism* 4.1 (1998): 90–103.

2. Lévi-Strauss, “Father Christmas Executed” 39.

precautions and sacrifices we make to keep his prestige intact for the children. Is it not that, deep within us, there is a small desire to believe in boundless generosity, kindness without ulterior motives, a brief interlude during which all fear, envy, and bitterness are suspended? No doubt we cannot fully share the illusion, but sharing with others at least gives us the chance to warm our hearts by the flame that burns in young souls. The belief that we help to perpetuate in our children that their toys come from “out there” gives us an alibi for our own secret desire to offer them to those “out there” on the pretext of giving them to the children. In this way, Christmas presents remain a true sacrifice to the sweetness of life, which consists first and foremost of not dying.³

It is instructive to set this impressive interpretation against a more celebrated passage from Lévi-Strauss's work, that which forms the closing lines of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.

To this very day, mankind has always dreamed of seizing and fixing that fleeting moment when it was permissible to believe that the law of exchange could be evaded, that one could gain without losing, enjoy without sharing. At either end of the earth and at both extremes of time, the Sumerian myth of the golden age and the Andaman myth of the future life correspond, the former placing the end of primitive happiness at a time when the confusion of languages made words into common property, the latter describing the bliss of the hereafter as a heaven where women will no longer be exchanged, i.e., removing to an equally unattainable past or future the joys, eternally denied to social man, of a world in which one might *keep to oneself*.⁴

The two passages set two complementary fantasies beside each other. Father Christmas represents the fantasy of the free gift: boundless generosity, kindness without ulterior motives. The utopian and prelapsarian myths cited in the second passage represent the fantasy of the free lunch: keeping to oneself, something for nothing. Both kinds of fantasy are characterized as potentially sociopathic. “[T]hat fleeting moment when it was permissible to believe that the law of exchange could be evaded,” a moment which might be an aesthetic or religious epiphany, is permissible for so long as it is taken to be transient. But it becomes socially toxic in any attempt to “seize” and “fix” it. In these circumstances it becomes a freeloader's charter. To believe that the law of exchange can be evaded is to believe that one could gain without losing, enjoy without sharing: is to want something for nothing. The fantasy of freedom from exchange is the sociopath's comfort blanket.

Yet is it really so certain that none ever does gain without losing, enjoy without sharing? Have we never been tempted to doubt the familiar assurance that, as a matter of fact, *there's no such thing as a free lunch*? That slogan,

3. Ibid. 50.

4. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) 496–97.

when examined closely, turns out to be a kind of negative theodicy. It insists that nothing can be successfully stolen, because, somehow, all guilt is paid for on this earth. But if the freeloader's debt, the thief's guilt, will always come back to their perpetrators, we are being offered a model of reciprocity which is in the event no less economic than that available in classical political economy. The slogans *no free lunch!* and *no free gifts!* are made to work for markets and potlatches, bank loans and wedding presents, headhunting and burglary. The slogans are thought of as working equally well for a modern morality of duty and for an archaic ethos of debt. They stand in for the logic of the social itself.

Something stranger is also happening here. The law of exchange, far from inhibiting the fantasies of the free lunch or the free gift, appears energetically to promote them. "At either end of the earth and at both extremes of time" the inexorability of this law does not liquidate, but rather generates, the hope of evading it. The work of curbing the gratis luncher is never done, even though it is supposed to be impossible for him to get away with it. The negative theodicy of the social is enforced by a kind of prescriptive reduplication. All those things which are said to be impossible to get away with—grabbing a free lunch, hitching a free ride, giving a free gift—are prohibited anyway for good measure, *just in case*.

It is this negative theodicy, and its accompanying rhetoric of prescriptive reduplication, that I shall examine in this essay. I shall argue that the lived theory of a perfected separation between gifts and exchanges, upon which both political economy and many contemporary forms of ethical reflection alike insist, is intimately entangled with two other lived theories of perfected separation which we might think of either as the fundamental achievements, or as the profoundly damaging misprisions, of modernity: the separation between prescription and description, and the separation between things and persons. The argument falls into four sections. I begin by examining one especially powerful instance of prescriptive reduplication, Mary Douglas's slogan "no free gifts." Then I analyse the equivocal doubling of *is* and *ought* which such a slogan tacitly performs in relation to two of its long-term genealogies: first, the relation between prescription and description in the work of one of the earliest proponents of a strict separation between the two, David Hume; and, thereafter, the separation of gifts from exchanges in the classical period of political economy. The third section of the paper indicates how difficult it is to escape from these separations, by showing how they extend forwards and backwards in some perhaps surprising directions: forwards, to a deconstructive meta-ethics of alterity, backwards, to a Jansenist anthropology of exchange. Finally I suggest some reasons for thinking that this kind of economism is not grounded, as is often thought, in an "individualist" epistemology and social ontology, but rather in the *failure* prop-

erly to think individual experience—as the experience of living, which is to say, suffering-desiring-thinking, beings.⁵ Such experience is instead usurped, in theory and in practice, by the formal legal concept of the person. The aim of the whole paper is to offer some resources for rethinking the nature of economism—by which I mean the dogma that the real and fundamental unit of social ontology is the self-interested exchange, and that all other ways of thinking about exchange are myths, fantasies, ideologies or irrelevancies. The paper, that is, aims to rethink economism in such a way as to make imaginable true, as well as false or bad, exits from it.

1

Mary Douglas provides a characteristically trenchant foreword to a recent retranslation of Marcel Mauss's classic essay *The gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*.⁶ It is worth remembering here one of the central achievements of that work, an achievement which will be in the background throughout this essay. What Mauss showed was that the separation between the economic and the political was not a natural but a historical one. He showed that modern accounts of exchange too often proceeded as though this historical separation were a feature of sociality itself; as though the categories of the political and the economic were fundamental social categories which could be used to understand all kinds of societies whatever. Mauss's interest focusses on particular kinds of exchange in which it is in fact quite impossible to separate the so-called "political" from the so-called "economic," kinds of exchange which he groups together under the heading of gift-exchange. Gift-exchange in this sense, for Mauss, is very different from the kind of exchange which happens when one buys a loaf of bread in a supermarket. That last kind of exchange is not a struggle for recognition.⁷ If

5. My notion of the "suffering-desiring-thinking individual" is informed above all by two sources, sources articulated in differing idioms which nevertheless have a real substantive affinity: (1) Michel Henry's "material phenomenology," as articulated in *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); *Lessence de la manifestation* (2nd ed., Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990); *Philosophie et phénoménologie du corps* (3rd ed., Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997); and *The Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); (2) to Theodor W. Adorno's meditations on the possibility of metaphysical experience and its relationship to a "thinking" which cannot but be somatically contaminated—for my reading of which cf. S. Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 193–231.

6. Mary Douglas, "No Free Gifts," in Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990) vii–xviii.

7. The term intentionally recalls Hegel's phenomenology of exchange, in which this insight into the historicity of the separation between the economic and the political is already present. Not enough work has been done on the no doubt complex routes by which Hegel's startling, if very differently formulated, anticipations of many of Mauss's central concepts—amongst which,

you buy a loaf of bread from me, it need not establish a relationship between us; we might never meet again; nor would there be anything odd about this. Nor is the legal standing of either of us as citizens at stake in the transaction. All that is dealt with beforehand. The exchange is supposed to leave our essence as persons untouched; it is simply the exchange of freely alienable things which we both have: your cash, my loaf of bread. What Mauss points out is that exchange is not always like this. In particular kinds of circumstance the exchange *is itself* the act in which our political relationship is established. Exchange necessarily establishes a relationship between us. If I cannot match your gift, I may become your debt-slave. There is no prior framework of law which, as it were, sorts all that kind of thing out; instead, exchange *is* the arena where it gets sorted out. For this reason, exchange is not merely economic in such contexts, but also deeply political. Or rather: the very categories of the “economic” and the “political” are only questionably applicable in such a context.

Mary Douglas heads her foreword to this essay “No free gifts.” She refers to one of the most celebrated features of Mauss’s essay: the challenge which it represents to an everyday modern notion that if a gift is actually going to be a gift, it ought to be a free gift, given without any expectation of return. Douglas reads Mauss as saying that the category of free gifts is an empty set, that nothing is ever given wholly without expectation of return. She puts this point in the following way.

It is not merely that there are no free gifts in a particular place, Melanesia or Chicago for instance; it is that the whole idea of a free gift is based on a misunderstanding. There should not be any free gifts. What is wrong with the so-called free gift is the donor’s intention to be exempt from return gifts coming from the recipient. Refusing requital puts the act of giving outside any mutual ties.⁸

The problem with the free gift, as Douglas understands it, is not so much that the giver is only pretending to give something for free and is really hoping for something back; it is rather that the free gift is a bid to escape from basic social obligations. The one who gives it hopes, by giving something for free, to get out of any relationship of obligation to the recipient. The free gift, like the free lunch, is, for Douglas, a model not for the virtuous citizen but for the sociopath. It is no accident that her title, “No Free Gifts,”

for instance, one may further instance the idea of the development of the modern concept of the person out of Christianity and Roman law—arrived at their Maussian destination. Claude Lefort has noted the connection in his article “L’échange et la lutte des hommes” (in *Les formes d’histoire. Essais d’anthropologie politique* [Paris: Gallimard, 1978]); but more remains to be done on its history.

8. Douglas, “No Free Gifts” vii.

is a slogan. Slogans often rely on an ambivalence between prescription and description which is produced by missing out the main verb (compare “no ideas but in things,” whose mood is similarly equivocal). In Douglas’s case, the slogan implies both *is* and *ought*, offering a good instance of prescriptive reduplication. There is no such thing as a free gift, and, what is more, there ought not to be any such thing either. But if there is no such thing as a free gift, why is there a need to prohibit it?

Prescriptive reduplication, then, is the apparently redundant underwriting of an *is* with an *ought*. Of course, the pattern of prescriptive reduplication can be present without just these words being used. Indeed, one thing that begins to surprise anyone who starts looking out for prescriptive reduplication is how often something formally similar crops up in the most diverse thinkers. “Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent.” “What is falling, should be pushed.” Prescriptive reduplication is a kind of *negative* theodicy because it supplants the slogan “whatever is, is right,” with, as it were, “whatever isn’t possible, is wrong.” It is, I shall go on to suggest, an inverse theodicy which prohibits access not only to transcendence but also to our own living experience: a metaphysics of absence.

2

This kind of prescriptive reduplication has a long history. It is a history in which both sides of the manoeuvre are equally important: first, the radical separation of *is* from *ought*; second, their reduplicative redoubling. I now sketch some relevant aspects of the history of the relationship between *is* and *ought* in modern philosophy. I then explore what I think are the intimate connections between prescriptive reduplication and the discourse of classical political economy as it emerges in the eighteenth century.

The locus classicus of the separation of *is* from *ought* can be found in David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*. At an early stage in book III, which is to deal with morals, Hume pauses to make the following observation:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark’d, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz’d to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or *ought not*.

9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* in *Werkausgabe 1* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989): 85; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Leipzig: Alfred Kröner, 1919) part 3, section 12, § 20, 305: “was fällt, das soll man auch noch stoßen!” Each of these, of course, is a complex case (in Wittgenstein, *muß* is not *soll*; in Nietzsche, *stoßen* adds something more than redundant to *fallen*) about which there is a good deal more to be said, which cannot be said (here).

This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.¹⁰

For Hume this is no mere blunder but rather an "imperceptible" transition, something which, it is implied, can be averted only with the help of the last vigilance. He has a fine sense of how easy it is to slip into this kind of illegitimate leap from one category to another. It is a good thing that he does have a fine sense of this, because earlier on in the book, he does it himself.

We speak not strictly and philosophically when we talk of the combat of passion and reason. Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.¹¹

That leap from *is* to *ought* may once indeed have seemed almost "imperceptible," as Hume suggests. It can strike the mind's ear as a kind of reiterative emphasis: as though Hume were saying that reason is and can only be the slave of the passions. Yet once we have noticed that leap, what strikes us is less its illegitimacy than its redundancy. If reason *is* the slave of the passions, why the need to say that it *ought* to be? The imperative, which is intended to reinforce Hume's argument, can have the reverse effect on the reader. If reason *ought* not pretend to any other office, it seems not only possible but probable that it often does so pretend, and thus needs to be held back.

As the title of Hume's third book, "Of Morals," suggests, it is not in fact Hume's intention to say that we can never get from an *is* to an *ought*, still less, with what would be a deeper redundancy, to say that we *ought* not to say *ought*; but rather that we ought always to notice when we are moving from *is* to *ought*, to know why we are doing it, and to be sure that we can justify it. Hume handles the whole problem, in fact, with just that adroitly managed poise between polite usage and rigorous scepticism which marks all his work, and which can lead to his thinking of himself, now as a mediating "Ambassador" bringing news from the learned to the polite world, now as "some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate."¹² Hume understands polite, or what has subsequently been de-

10. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 469.

11. *Ibid.* 415.

12. *Ibid.* 264; for Hume's description of himself as "a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation," cf. "Of Essay Writing" in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985) 533-37, 535.

mocratized as “ordinary,” language, as what rescues us from the radical isolation in which the monstrously uncouth sceptic finds himself. For this reason, despite Hume’s alertness to the potential illegitimacy of a leap from “is” to “ought,” his is also writing whose actual texture could not be read as a literal-minded purgation of all evaluative or normative implications from a remnant of supposed sheer description.

Hume’s idea about the potential illegitimacy of these imperceptible transitions is one of those little warnings which, once read, is not easily forgotten. Indeed, one might think of a good deal of the subsequent history of philosophy as an elaboration of Hume’s problem. To take only one of many possible lines of descent—from the unbridgeable gulf between the two which Kant first set up, and then set about elaborately bridging; to Hegel’s speculative identification of *is* and *ought* which came to many of the generation immediately following him to look like an ill-disguised theodicy; to Marx’s attempt to refuse this theodicy without falling back into empty prescription; to the efforts of first-generation critical theory to deepen the philosophical basis of this attempt through a rethinking of Hegel’s own speculative thought; to, finally, the return of second-generation critical theory to a broadly Kantian architectonic in which the ineliminably normative is to be procedurally, but not ontologically separated out from the descriptive—*is* and *ought* have been falling apart and put back together again over and over ever since Hume’s remark.¹³

But there is also another history which, equally, takes much of its impetus from Hume’s insight, the history of the discourse of political economy. Hume’s separation between *is* and *ought* is taken on by political economy, not at the level of an individual doctrine, but rather as a feature of the architecture which underpins political economy itself. The separation between *is* and *ought* is not a matter of a particular theory offered by this or that political economist. It is rather a framing presupposition of the discourse of political economy itself. It allows political economy to be thought of as a science.¹⁴ We can see this if we compare commentators with such widely differing agendas as Turgot, Adam Smith, and Edmund Burke. In his “Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth,” the eighteenth-century French economist Turgot devotes special attention to the problem of usury. Turgot

13. For a further account of the relation between prescription and description in this tradition, cf. S. Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998) 226–31.

14. Hence the emphasis laid upon this point—where the question of methodology is at all considered—by histories of this science written from the standpoint of the current science of economics. Cf. Terence Hutchison, *Before Adam Smith: The Emergence of Political Economy, 1662–1776* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 57: “the distinction between normative and positive, or between the moral and the technical, was gradually gaining ground.”

suggests that opponents of usury have been misled by the gospel principle, which he quotes from the vulgate text of Luke, *Mutuuum date nihil inde sperantes*: give to each other without hoping for anything back.¹⁵ He goes on to argue that this text has been misread by patristic and scholastic critics of usury. For Ambrose and Jerome, it is a prohibition of the unearned interest gathered by the usurer: “one calls anything whatsoever usury and surplus if one collects more than one has given.”¹⁶ Such a reading was still current in eighteenth-century France.¹⁷ Turgot reads this text very differently. For him, its point is to separate gifts from exchanges. “Gift” must mean “free gift,” otherwise it is not a gift at all but an exchange. Exchanges, conversely, are by their very nature interested. *Mutuuum date nihil inde sperantes*, read through Turgot’s eyes, means this: if you really are giving, expect nothing at all back, otherwise it is not a gift; but if you are entering into a contract all that matters is that the contract should be voluntary on both sides. Fair exchange is guaranteed by the consent of the contracting parties. The fact that fair exchange yields a surplus is no longer an ethical *problem*—the problem which prompted the medieval prohibitions on usury—but the secret of (social) life. This is a solution produced by the proposed *perfection* of the separation between gifts and exchanges which some critics of usury had themselves insisted upon.¹⁸ It requires that usury shall cease to be treated as a moral, and shall instead be regarded as a technical, problem. This can be seen in such late seventeenth-century works as Josiah Child’s *New Discourse of Trade*. Although Child describes his opponent as a “stout champion for the slie and timerous herd of Usurers,” he does not recommend that usury should be outlawed. His argument is rather that, should the rate be set higher than that of neighbouring nations, it would damage national prosperity. Usury then becomes “*Malum in se*, by the light of nature, and consequently a sin, although God had never expressly forbid it.”¹⁹

The radicalized distinction between the free gift and the interested exchange, and the conversion of surplus value from a moral into a technical problem, are by no means peculiar to Turgot. They make political economy possible. Exchange is opposed to donation; donation must not be a kind of exchange, nor is exchange conceivable as a kind of donation. This privatis-

15. The text was most often cited thus by scholastic commentators on usury. Cf. Jacques Le Goff, *Your Money or Your Life: Economy and Religion in the Middle Ages*, trans. Patricia Raum (New York: Zone Books, 1990) 21–22. The reading is a contested one; cf. note 50 below.

16. Jerome on Ezekiel 18.6, quoted in Le Goff 26.

17. Jean Domat, *The Civil Law in its Natural Order: Together with the Publick Law*, 2 vols. (London, 1722) 1:125.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Sir Josiah Child, *A New Discourse of Trade* (4th ed., London, n.d.) 44; viii–ix.

ing of the gift can be seen in Edmund Burke's response to demands that bread should be made available to feed the hungry in 1795.

Whenever it happens that a man can claim nothing according to the rules of commerce, and the principles of justice, he passes out of that department, and comes within the jurisdiction of mercy. In that province the magistrate has nothing at all to do: his interference is a violation of the property which it is his office to protect.²⁰

Burke counters demands for relief from starvation—demands which E.P. Thompson described in his essay on the moral economy of the English crowd—by representing the department of gifts as absolutely separate from that of exchange.²¹ All Christians do indeed have a direct duty of charity to the poor, but this is “next in order after the payment of debts.” Only when the books are legally balanced in the sphere of exchange may the surplus ethically be deployed in the sphere of gifts. As Adam Smith put it, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”²² This is not at all to say that the author of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* thought that it did not matter whether brewers, butchers, and bakers were benevolent or not. It is rather to see that he insisted that we understand a separation of powers between their actions as benevolent donors and as interested exchangers.

The possibility of political economy, then, rests on this prior distinction between gifts, which must always be free in order to be gifts, and exchanges, which are by their nature interested. Only the latter form part of the subject matter of political economy. In practice political economists are generally sceptical or indifferent as to whether a category of free gifts really exists. What is important is that political economy should be able to show how the books balance, without appealing to a hypothesis of gifts. That is to say, political economy must show how everything *is* just as it *ought* to be, yet without having recourse to a hypothesis that people act as they ought to. It thus rests on the idea of a radical separation of “is” from “ought”: separating a description of how exchanges *are* conducted from a theory of how gifts *ought* to be given. And yet it also produces, once more, the structure of prescriptive reduplication with which we were preoccupied earlier: exchanges cannot, *and ought not to*, have anything to do with gifts. The idea that the map of exchanges might be distorted by gifts of which that map could not take account is first declared impossible, and then prohibited too.

20. Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity, Originally presented to the Right Hon. William Pitt, in the month of November 1795* (London, 1800) 18.

21. E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century” in *Customs in Common* (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 185–258.

22. Adam Smith, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols. (London, 1776) 1:17.

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If the idea of a free gift really is, as Mary Douglas claims, a “misunderstanding,” then it is a misunderstanding which is so deeply woven into our lives that it is extremely hard for us to think ourselves out of it. I wish now to consider how this economic separation between *is* and *ought*, gifts and exchanges, together with the prescriptive reduplication of the two, continues to shape even the work of those painfully aware of the ways in which they are determined by it. The extent to which the idea that gift just *means* free gift has bedded down in our experience can be illustrated if we briefly consider Jacques Derrida’s influential reading of Mauss’s essay. What is at once noticeable there is the continued importance of the notion that gift *means* free gift.

Mauss does not worry enough about this incompatibility between gift and exchange or about the fact that an exchanged gift is only a tit for tat, that is, an annulment of the gift. By underscoring this, we do not mean to say that *there is no* exchanged gift. One cannot deny the *phenomenon*, nor that which presents this precisely phenomenal aspect of exchanged gifts. But the apparent, visible contradiction of these two values, gift and exchange—must be problematized. What must be interrogated, it seems, is precisely this being-together, the at-the-same-time, the synthesis, the symmetry, the syntax, or the system, the *syn* that joins together two processes that are by rights [*en droit*] as incompatible as that of the gift and that of exchange.²³

The claim here that the gift and exchange are two processes which are “by rights” “incompatible” is not in fact one woven into or out of anyone else’s position. It is what Derrida claims. If gifts are exchanged, they are no longer gifts. Derrida knows very well that “Mauss is not at all bothered about speaking of exchanged gifts; he even thinks that there is gift only in exchange.”²⁴ The insistence that gifts are “by rights” incompatible with exchange is a quite self-conscious declaration of independence from a tradition. “Even though all the anthropologies, indeed the metaphysics of the gift have, *quite rightly and justifiably*, treated together, as a system, the gift and the debt, the gift and the cycle of restitution, the gift and the loan, the gift and credit, we are here *departing*, in a peremptory and distinct fashion, from this tradition.”²⁵ In peremptorily departing from this tradition, Derrida joins another one. It is the tradition of economism: the tradition in which only what is in no way contaminated by exchange can count as a gift. This is a logic which Derrida pursues with a Jansenist relentlessness. For Derrida, anyone who

23. *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 37–38.

24. *Ibid.* 39.

25. *Ibid.* 13.

even thinks to herself “I have given a gift” has by that token not given a gift at all, because she has already received the compensation of her own awareness of giving. Giving the gift thus becomes not merely impossible, but “*the* impossible. The very figure of the impossible.”²⁶ It is unsurprising that Derrida then goes on to use Kant’s transcendental dialectic as a good if imperfect way in to thinking about the gift.²⁷

What Derrida’s account, in its own idiom, brings to light, is the way in which the notion of purely interested exchange is dependent upon the idea of something which escapes purely interested exchange. The free gift is that category which is both empty and necessary, because without it the sphere which *is* exchange cannot be kept uncontaminated by *oughts*. But as soon as we claim that *by rights* [*en droit*] the categories of gift and exchange are opposed to each other we treat this historical opposition as though it were a (quasi-) transcendental one.²⁸ Just now I compared Derrida’s ruthless reduction of the gift with Jansenism. The comparison is in fact more than a chance resemblance. It brings to light something still too rarely remembered: the theological roots of that apparently most secular of disciplines, political economy. When Bernard Mandeville coined its central maxim with a shocking frankness that was rarely to be repeated—private vice, public virtue—his anthropology may have been drawn in part from the moral essays of the Jansenist Pierre Nicole.²⁹ For Nicole it is scarcely possible to imagine a charitable act not impelled by self-love. The category of free gifts is an empty set. Even martyrdom does not count: “self-love is also capable to make us suffer death with joy.”³⁰ Indeed, so intricate are the workings of self-love that it is hardly possible for the giver to know his or her own motives. Our desire for the esteem of others is an “inclination so nice, and subtle, and at the same time of such a latitude, that there is nothing it cannot enter into; and it knows so well how to trim itself to the appearances of Charity, that it is

26. *Ibid.* 7.

27. *Ibid.* 30.

28. Of course, “Derrida knows all this.” But that is not the point at issue. We should emulate Derrida’s own tenacity in fixing upon Heidegger’s use of the word *Geist*. His claim is a claim about right: *en droit*. No later complexity unwrites this claim. This essay does not claim to provide an “exhaustive” reading of Derrida’s reading. Such a document, were it imaginable, would be of no interest. This part of the essay claims instead to read this claim, a claim which Derrida makes: that gift and exchange are *by rights* incompatible.

29. Cf. Marcel Raymond, “Du jansénisme à la morale de l’intérêt,” *Mercure de France* 330 (1957): 238–55, 251; Hutchison, *Before Adam Smith* 100. As Raymond points out (240, 243), this Jansenist anthropology is itself indebted to Hobbes.

30. [Pierre Nicole] “Of Charity and Self-love” in *Moral Essays. Contain’d in several Treatises on Many Important Duties ... Faithfully Rendred into English, by A Person of Quality*, 3 vols. (London, 1677–80) 3:62.

almost impossible to know exquisitely what distinguishes it from Charity. Because marching in the same steps, and producing the same effects, it defaces with a marvellous subtlety all the signs, and characters of Self-love from whence it springs...".³¹ There are significant echoes of demonology here. Self-love invisibly spoils the milk of any human kindness. Yet in the event it does not *spoil* it, because the providential wonder is that self-love produces just the same effects as charity:

Some endeavour to make it [the self-love of others] fit for their Interests, others employ flattery to gain it. Gifts are bestowed to obtain it. This is the source and foundation of all Commerce practised among men, and which is varied a thousand ways. For they do not truck merchandises for merchandises or money, but they mutually traffick, I mean they make a trade also of labours and toyls, of services done, of diligence and assiduity, of civility; and then exchange all that either for things of the same nature, or for real goods, as when by vain complacencies we obtain effective commodities.

'Tis thus that by the means and help of this Commerce, all necessities for this life are in some sort without intermixing Charity with it. So that in Estates, where Charity hath no admittance, because true Religion is banished from thence, men do not cease to live with as much peace, safety and commodiousness, as if they were in a Republick of Saints.³²

Nicole's anthropology radicalizes the doctrine of the fortunate fall into a providential calculus of goods and services. It is our radical fallenness that means that no human gift can be understood as free. There shall be no free gifts but God's. Gifts which appear to be free are always looking for a return even when the donor is not aware of this. Nicole, moreover, far from limiting his analysis to commercial exchanges, offers us in his account of the exchange of *praises* and *esteem* a theory of what was later to be called "symbolic capital."³³ And yet it is precisely this fallenness which ensures that all takes place just as though the world were ruled by charity. Nicole drastically simplifies patristic theories of the fall. Our nature has nothing divine about it, but the divine miracle is that this does not matter. Nicole's anthropology is an inaugural document of the republic of irreligious saints, the modern state. Political economy's broad cheerfulness carries buried inside it this austere monochrome theology.

31. Ibid. 135.

32. Ibid. 128. Cf. Domat, *The Civil Law* 1:xx. "From so bad a Cause as our Self-Love, and from a Poison so contrary to Mutual Love, which ought to be the Foundation of Society, God hath made use of it as one of the Remedies for preserving it in being."

33. Pierre Bourdieu is well aware of the connections between his own thought and that of the late seventeenth-century French moralists. Cf., among other instances, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 6. For an application of some of the ideas developed in this paper to Bourdieu's theory of exchange, cf. Jarvis, "Wordsworth's Gifts of Feeling" 96–101.

The key to this providential twist, the twist by which self-love produces the same effects as charity, is the expulsion of free gifts from exchange. All apparently free human gifts turn out to be exchanges; the free gift persists only as something like an ineliminable illusion, or a necessary impossibility. This apparently chimerical category, the category of the free gift, is as essential to political economy as its opponent, the interested exchange. This has far-reaching consequences for the way in which we treat these concepts. As Jonathan Parry has pointed out, in the best single contemporary interpretation of Mauss's essay, although Mauss is interpreted as saying that in fact the gift is never free, he is rather asking how *we* have developed a theory that it should be.³⁴ Douglas thinks that we should delete the category of the free gift. There are no free gifts; there should be no free gifts. What the history of this category tells us, though, is that the idea of purely interested exchange is twinned with the idea of the purely free gift. If we delete one, we must delete the other. The concept of interestedness depends on that of disinterestedness for its very intelligibility. When the social scientist tries to give a total calculus of universal interestedness, the free gift is not in fact deleted. It simply migrates to the social scientist's own vantage point. The social scientist offers us the free gift of sheer givenness, an analysis of universal interestedness to which there is this sole exception: the disinterested standpoint of science itself.³⁵

What this is beginning to suggest is that it is not enough to think of the idea of the free gift as an "ideology." Or rather, it is not appropriate to treat the idea of the free gift as an ideology for so long as the idea of universal interestedness is treated, by contrast, not as something ideological at all but, rather, as the real basis of life. Particular instances of false appeals to giving of course face us everywhere. Yet the concept of a purely disinterested donation is no more and no less "ideological" than the concept of a purely interested exchange. Let us go further. The free gift can no more be adequately treated by calling it an "ideology" than can the word *ought* itself.³⁶ What I wish to suggest is that the two separations which I have described—the radical separa-

34. Jonathan Parry, "The Gift, the Indian Gift, and the 'Indian Gift,'" *Man*, n.s. 21 (1986): 453–73.

35. Here the crucial point is by no means whether the social scientist in question understands his or her own position as disinterested, but the structure by which *ought* leaves the world and settles in questions of social-scientific methodology. For a trenchant analysis of this pattern as constitutive of sociology's unilateral, incomplete, and non-perfectible farewell to metaphysics, cf. Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981) chapter 1: "The Antinomies of Sociological Reason," 1–47.

36. This is partly because currently dominant uses of the concept of ideology misapply a concept which in its Marxian form was ironic and particular as though it were literal and universal. I develop this argument further in my introduction to a forthcoming study of Wordsworth.

ration between free gift and interested exchange, and the radical separation between ought and is—are caught in an intimate and mutually enabling relationship with each other: that they may, in an important sense, be the same separation. Hume's warning about smuggling *ought* into *is* does not merely coincide with the way in which the political economists expel free gifts from exchanges: it is an essential accompaniment to that architecture. For both tropes the rule is that no rabbits must be pulled out of any hats.

Why is it so important to expel gifts from exchange? Because political economy is in truth by no means purely descriptive.³⁷ It is still haunted by the problem of legitimation which preoccupied the commentators on usury. Hence the importance of political economy's theological prehistory: the apparently surprising appearance of a chunk of scriptural exegesis in the middle of an explanation of how to maximize national wealth, the Jansenist antecedents of the secular invisible hand. The problem which haunts it is this. How can a fair exchange possibly yield a surplus for one party? Doesn't that mean that it isn't fair at all? That remained a barely superable problem for so long as fairness was defined with reference to what was actually exchanged. But as soon as it could be defined subjectively, from the contractual agreement of the parties, the problem could begin to disappear. This is why Turgot is able to call surplus value "the gift of nature." It is represented, not as the result of a monopolistic expropriation, but as something which comes to us for free, on condition that we keep the distinction between free gifts and exchanges tightly policed. If we allow the gift to contaminate exchange—by interfering in supposedly ethically motivated ways with its pure interestedness—this "gift of nature," surplus value, will dry up. Surplus value is God's gift to the world; only if we do not usurp this divine prerogative will it continue to be exercised in our favour.

Let us return to the manoeuvre which I earlier described as "prescriptive reduplication": there are no free gifts, and, what is more, there ought not to be any either. What I want to suggest is that this kind of redundant prescription, rather than the bare idea of the free gift, is at the core of economic myth. Economism has come to think of the free gift as an ideology. In doing so, it appeals to a social ontology of pure interestedness which is itself dependent on the very category which has been declared ideological. Prescriptive reduplication is the legitimation of surplus value. It is the way in which surplus value is made to disappear as a moral problem and to reappear as—what else?—a free gift. This is the function of the slogan, and its vacant

37. Cf. Louis Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx: the Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). This point is forcefully made, as Dumont notes, by Gunnar Myrdal, *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

verblessness. “No free lunch!” Translation: “There shall be no free gifts but surplus value.” Surplus value is the free lunch, the “gift of nature,” which that slogan prescriptively prohibits, but descriptively conceals.

4

What is the genealogy of this economism? Some reflection upon the structure of surplus value may provide a first clue here. Human labour, bought and sold as though it were like any other commodity, is in fact unlike any other commodity because it is alive and is capable of making further commodities. The living commodities from which surplus value is extracted offer and are made to offer the gift of their own difference from hardware. The fact that they are living is what never gets into the accounts.³⁸ From this follows with fatal logic a willingness to regard the distinction between the living and the dead as a merely “metaphysical,” or, more gently, say, a “pre-deconstructive” one.³⁹ There shall be no free gifts but surplus value: so that the gift of life, a gift which is given to all but which is always given to me in particular, must itself be made to appear as locked into an exchange with death. Subjectivity must be imagined according to the logic of sacrifice. It is this last implication that I now pursue: the suggestion that economism, an economism which we have seen to be locked into the logic both of commodity culture and of imagined exits from that culture, does not merely imply a particular way of understanding the relation between, say, the individual and the community, or between law and exchange, but also moulds the ontology of human life in its own image: into an economy.

In order to illustrate this point I want to turn to a famous passage from the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here Kant is explaining how his transcendental method works as a limitation of metaphysical speculation.

Nothing but the sobriety of a strict but just criticism can liberate us from these dogmatic semblances, which through imagined happiness hold so many subject to theories and systems, and limit all our speculative claims merely to the field of possible experience, not by stale mockery at attempts that have so often failed, or by pious sighing over the limits of our reason, but by means of a complete determination of reason's boundaries according to secure principles, which with the greatest reliability fastens its *nihil ulterius* on those Pillars of Hercules that nature has erected, so that the voyage of our reason may proceed only as far as the continuous coastline of experience reaches, a

38. Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes et al., 3 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976) 1:270, 317, 326–27. For an interpretation of the difference between the living and the non-living as central to Marx's thought, cf. Michel Henry, *Marx*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

39. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994) 170. The point is not unwritten by the subsequent safety-net to the effect that “Pre-deconstructive here does not mean false, unnecessary, or illusory” (ibid.).

coastline that we cannot leave without venturing out into a shoreless ocean, which, among always deceptive prospects, forces us in the end to abandon as hopeless all our troublesome and tedious efforts.⁴⁰

This passage argues for the need to set properly determined limits to metaphysical speculation. To take the instance of such speculation which is critical for this paper, Kant is pointing out that although we do indeed have *a priori* access to pure concepts of the understanding, these concepts do not provide us with knowledge, for example, of the reality of the human soul, or indeed of the *reality* of any living subjectivity. But the metaphors which Kant uses here reveal a redundancy in the procedure of the transcendental dialectic. Critique fastens its “nihil ulterius” on pillars which nature herself has already erected. The limit which the critic is to set is one which already exists. Its *nihil ulterius*; moreover, is misleading; there is *not* anything beyond these limits, but an (albeit shoreless) “ocean.” These difficulties are not contingent upon these metaphors but are incident to the whole project of reason’s self-limiting critique. It is not clear why criticism should need to “set” a limit which is regarded as naturally inherent in reason; or, rather, this need raises the acute difficulty that reason is supposed both to be naturally transgressive and to be critically self-limiting.⁴¹ So that while criticism may beat its bounds, it cannot put a stop to lawless speculation. The dialectic induced by such speculation is “one that irremediably attaches to human reason, so that even after we have exposed the mirage it will still not cease to lead our reason on with false hopes, continually propelling it into momentary aberrations that always need to be removed.”⁴²

Incommensurable though the subjects of Lévi-Strauss’s and Kant’s thoughts may at first appear, this prohibition on immediate knowledge of the soul shares a common shape with the prohibition on the fantasy of keeping to oneself examined earlier. For Lévi-Strauss, human sociation is recidivist. It continually reaches for the free lunch, for the free gift, which it can never obtain. For Kant, human reason is recidivist. It continually reaches for that immediate knowledge of the being of a real living subject which it can never obtain. The structure of both responses to recidivism is a prescriptive reduplication. In both instances, we are shown a larceny which is supposed to be impossible, but which is prohibited anyway just in case. What is supposed to be impossible is ruled out for good measure by a kind of redoubling:

40. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 439 (A395–96).

41. Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969) 131–36.

42. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Guyer and Wood, 386–87 (A298/B354–55).

fastening *nihil ulterius* on pillars already erected. We may recall Marvell's garden-fancier, angry with the lovers who have carved their names on the trees, and promising that his own behaviour will be much better. "Fair trees! wheres'er your barks I wound / No name shall but your own be found."⁴³

When Kant raises to its most consistent form the legal opposition, inherited from Roman law but dominant in modernity, between things and persons, the crucial point about these persons is not that they are living—suffering-desiring-thinking individuals—but that they are rational beings capable of morality; capable, that is, of a pure *ought*.⁴⁴ In Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* only a person has a dignity, whilst things have a price. This cannot be based in any certain knowledge of ourselves as living beings, because such knowledge has already been denied. Indeed, the presence of any empirically affective element in the person, the rational being capable of morality, would be a contamination. Now this idea of a perfect separation between persons and things is, as Mauss himself noticed, closely bound up with the other separations which we have so far been investigating: the expulsion of gifts from exchange, and the separation of "is" from "ought." The advent of a mode of exchange which creates no relation between the exchanging parties is possible only on condition of a separation between things and persons. Only if the exchanged objects are freely alienable—that is to say, only if they are not thought to contain part of the person in them—can an exchange fail to establish a relation. In the gift-exchanges analysed by Mauss, conversely, the inevitability of obligatedness is construed precisely through this idiom: through the idea that some part of the person is embedded in the object exchanged.⁴⁵

Adorno once remarked that Kant's epistemology could be understood as an elaboration of the injunction *wirf weg, damit Du gewinnst* (loosely translated: "lose to win!").⁴⁶ This is one way of specifying transcendental method.

43. Andrew Marvell, "The Garden," in *Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972) 100–01, 100.

44. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1956) 102.

45. Mauss, *The Gift* 12.

46. *Vorlesung zur Einleitung in die Erkenntnistheorie 1957–1958* (Frankfurt am Main: Junius, n.d.) 199: "der große Zug der kantischen Erkenntnistheorie ist wirklich eine Art: wirf weg, damit Du gewinnst. D.h. es soll versucht werden, durch eine nicht eingeschränkte, gehemmte Kritik nun gerade jene Objektivität zu gewinnen, die im allgemeinen bloß als der Gegensatz zu einer solchen Kritik begriffen wird." One may add that something of the same structure can be discerned in Hegel's characterization of his thought as a "way of despair" or a *sich vollbringende Skeptizismus*—a "thoroughgoing" or "self-perficient" scepticism (John Raffan's rendering, as reported by Gillian Rose: *Hegel contra Sociology* 241). G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952) 67; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 49, 50.

We are to throw away everything except that of which it is literally unthinkable to strip ourselves, so that we are left with those concepts which we cannot *not* use, those concepts in which even the sceptic who thinks she has deleted them nevertheless finds the language of her very deletion perpetually entangled. Then what you are given back is something of which you may be absolutely certain. But what you are not given back, in Kant's critique, is the certainty that you are really alive, that is, that you *are* a suffering-desiring-thinking *being*. For Kant, this would be a misemployment of the pure concepts of the understanding, without which no knowledge of objects is possible, but which, as he repeatedly emphasizes, can by themselves give us no knowledge of objects. Kantian thought is in this sense a kind of *misère ouverte*. If all the cards are placed on the table, defeat can be turned into a kind of victory. The Kantian person is thus inserted into a long history of the empty or sacrificial individual, the individuality which attempts to secure its own transcendent reality—by throwing away its living experience. The price of securing life is to deny it.

So tenaciously is this emptied individual, the person, inserted into western history, that any attempt to specify its *origin* appears necessarily doomed to be undone by an earlier example. But the hand of *misère ouverte* played by the Kantian subject has one powerful antecedent in the early history of Christian asceticism. The lives of the desert fathers are full of uncanny anticipations of the Kantian subject. Those anticipations are at their most potent, not in the most dazzling performances of those early body artists, their pillar-squatting and fasts, but, rather, just where the other-worldly renunciation of the ascetic must be reconciled with life in the world. Already in the terms in which Gregory of Nazianzen praises a figure such as Athanasius in the fourth century of the Christian era we have a notable foretaste of the person-as-economy.

He reconciled in this way anchoritism and coenobitism by showing that there is a sacred mission which is a sort of "philosophy" and a sort of "philosophy" which needs the sacred minister. He harmonized in this way the two kinds of life, and associated them, under the form of activities compatible with retirement, and retirement compatible with an active life, in such a way as to convince all that what is essential in the monastic profession consists in the constant fidelity to a way of life rather than in the material fact of being retired from the world, following the principle which made of David the great a very busy man of action at the same time as being a perfect solitary in acknowledging, as the surest confirmation of what I have just said, the verse of the psalm: "I am solitary and shall be so until the end."⁴⁷

47. Gregory Nazianzen, Oration 21, in Justin Mossay, ed., *Discours 20–23* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1980) 150–51.

For Gregory it was Athanasius's key achievement to have taught unworldly asceticism how to live in the world. The unification of solitary and communal forms of monastic retreat demonstrates that monasticism need not imply a literal retreat from the world, but may rather consist in a kind of internal or theoretical retreat. In Nazianzen's David—"a very busy man of action at the same time as being a perfect solitary"—we meet for the first time, at least in this precise shape, a figure which is to resonate throughout the history of the economistic person: the worldly solitary.⁴⁸

The strange accents of the modern person's masked voice are heard here as never quite before. But what we hear in them is only imperfectly understood as "individualism." It would be more accurately thought of as a "personalism," because the subject of economism is not the living individual, but the emptied apperceptive mask, the set of legal representations which the most perfectly solitary man sends into the world to act for him. It is the *I think* which accompanies all my representations but which cannot know that it is, alive. It is the rights-bearing persona which may freely alienate its object-like property. In this sense, then, it may be a mistake to think that the trouble with economism is that it is too individualistic. Economism is not individualistic enough, in the sense that its actor, *homo economicus*, is not even an individual.⁴⁹ Written into this person in advance is the ascetic's "lose to win": the person which knows never to try to hold on to anything in particular, including its own living experience, in order that it may hold on to the one thing needful, its legal identity. We might reconsider in this light the diverse dismantlings and deletions of subjectivity which have taken such a powerfully central role in the philosophy of this century—whether in a bluntly positivistic form such as Gilbert Ryle's assertion that the idea of a soul is a "category-mistake," or in the form that subjectivity is an effect of discourse, a set of representations, or a cultural construction.⁵⁰ Such dismantlings take themselves to be pushing against a current which they in

48. Raymond, "Jansénisme" 255, comments that Nicole's Christian "doit vivre dans le monde *incognito* et comme sous le masque; caché en quelque sorte à lui-même."

49. It is here that this paper differs from the suggestive genealogy of economism offered by Louis Dumont in his *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Perspective* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986) and in *From Mandeville to Marx*. Dumont's project, comparing a supposed Hindu *Homo hierarchicus* with a modern western *Homo aequalis*, implies that the very idea of a community of equal individuals is inextricably twinned with economistic personalism. It is the aim of the present essay to begin to imagine how the two might be detached from each other. Where Dumont understands Marx as in critical respects an economistic individualist, crucial here is Michel Henry's distinction between Marx's living individuals, and *homo economicus* as the subject of the economy. Cf. Henry, *Marx*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 1:162–279, 2:70–137.

50. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949) 7–24.

fact speed on. In offering to dismantle a supposedly ruling individualism, they confirm and petrify the personalism which has in fact been dominant.⁵¹

I conclude by returning to that quotation from the Vulgate Luke which formed such an important exegetical object for scholastic thought and for supposedly secular political economy alike. *Mutuum date nihil inde sperantes*: give to each other without hoping for any return. In fact, this is a contested reading, for the manuscripts currently thought to be best attested give another version. They read: *Mutuum date nihil desperantes*. Give to each other, despairing in no way.⁵² The first reading is paradoxical: give to each other, but without hoping for anything back. It represents a reciprocity in which neither gift is conceived of as a payment, acquittal or revenge: an exchange which is founded neither on contractual exchange nor simply on disinterested altruism but on a utopian community in which, precisely, the gift is freely given, yet without wishing to acquit the giver from relation. While the first reading commands us not to hope for anything back, to give freely rather than interestedly, the second commands us, in a much more general way, to give to each and not to despair. In the event it has been despair in a quite particular sense which has governed the fate of the gift under economism: the gift conceived of as a *misère ouverte*, a game of lose-to-win.

We have been charting the course of three separations which represent what we might think of as fundamental lived theories of modernity: the separations between gift and exchange, *is* and *ought*, thing and person. In each case we have a separation which is supposed to be radical. But in each case we have a separation which cannot in principle be made perfect without closing itself. As soon as we say that, for example, the social scientist ought only to concern herself with things as they are, the chimera of an utterly descriptive discourse has broken down. Likewise, no exchange can take place at all unless the parties to it give each other something—a sense of the word which persists despite all the claims that giving, in order really to be such, must have nothing to do with exchange. And the impossibility of absolutely separating things from persons becomes strikingly clear when persons wish to treat parts of themselves as freely alienable things: by selling their own organs, for example. It could not be the hope of this essay to close these separations. That would not effect a dissolution of the categories but only a barbaric regression within them: as though, for example, it were only natural to treat persons as things; as though kindness and generosity themselves were merely “ideologies”; as though what now is, ought always to be so. All

51. Cf. note 5 above.

52. Luke 6.35. *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994) 1618 and note.

these would be false exits. Instead the essay hopes to have indicated how the fiction that these separations are perfect is premised on the systematic closure of another and more vital separation: the separation between the living and the dead. What is essential is not to close the gap between person and thing, is and ought, gift and exchange, but to prise open a gap between the living and the dead; a gap which, in their pseudo-perfected form, those separations regard as a matter of indifference. The slogans of economism are a religion of despair: *no free lunch! no free gifts! never try to hold on to anything!* These are the preservatives of capital, the parodic theodicy by which its funds, stocks and futures are infused with their convulsive half-life. That half-life depends on the repeated collective disowning of living experience. What might it be like if we could set against those slogans these two variant readings? Can we come to hear how their note might sound differently from the economisms into which they have been enlisted and with which they are certainly inculcated?⁵³ *Mutuuum date nihil inde sperantes; mutuuum date nihil desperantes.* The two readings together, if only formally, make something like an antinomy: one commands us not to despair; the other, not to hope. It may be necessary to combine them; it may be, in other words, that only if we can stop placing our best hope in despair shall we find the exit.

53. One kind of answer to this question is offered in John Milbank's persuasive criticisms of Jean-Luc Marion's and Derrida's views of donation in his "Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic," *Modern Theology* 11.1 (Jan. 1995): 119–61. I consider that Milbank underestimates, because he rightly wishes not to despair about, the depth and import of our entanglement in economistic modernity, and hence misrecognises the difficulties of exiting from it. A necessarily brief initial statement of my differences from Phillip Blond's, Milbank's, Catherine Pickstock's and Graham Ward's "radical orthodoxy" can be found in a forthcoming review (in the journal *Textual Practice*) of Blond, ed. *Post-Secular Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Pickstock, *After Writing. On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998).