

A substantial body of work has shown that one cannot appreciate the significance of Confucian philosophy if ritual propriety (*li*, 禮) is not taken fully into account.¹ It has also been suggested that ritual propriety remains relevant for those who argue for an ethic of interpersonal relationships and a socialized self for, in order to outline which modes of behavior are best suited for developing a wide range of fruitful social relationships essential for personal development, something must be said about the form of social conduct. On the Confucian account, ritual propriety is essential since it allows individuals to form and maintain social relationships, to develop personally, and to suffuse experience with moral and aesthetic value. However, a difficulty arises since many of the rituals advocated and practiced by the early Confucians seem excessively stringent and oftentimes altogether impractical in modern contexts.² Further, one is left wondering how the *specific* components of ritual action can be applied in modern contexts.

In this essay I investigate a particular ritual—the exchange of gifts. Gift exchange continues to be practiced in modern contexts, and the Confucian stance on such exchange can both shed light on the social function of the gift economy and outline how it should be practiced within the context of a relational ethic. Further, since gift exchange is both a social and economic affair, an analysis of it provides insight into the relationship between moral and economic value and encourages us to consider the moral status of both social and economic exchange.³

This essay addresses practical issues, that is, the Confucian understanding of the

¹ See Fingarette 1972, Ames and Hall 1987, and Eno 1990.

² For example, the mourning rites prescribed by Confucius seem excessive as does his criticism of music that strays from traditional standard. See *Analects* 14.40, 15.11, 17.21, and 17.18.

³ For more on this relationship see Gregory 1982, Schrift 1991, and Weiner 1990.

gift economy and the relevance that this approach has for the contemporary practice of gift exchange. In doing so, it provides insight into the manner in which ritual action can be put into practice in a Confucian spirit. In order to approach the Confucian stance on the matter and to analyze the general form and function of gift exchange I will utilize points made in Mauss' classic essay *Essai sur le Don* as well as those made in the work of the anthropologist Maurice Godelier. This will allow me to demonstrate that the gift economy that is characteristic of ancient China should be interpreted in terms of the instantiation of a social hierarchy and the creation of obligations. It will then be argued that a relational ethic must remain critical of purely instrumental gift exchange (in which the giver uses the exchange to further his or her interests), must emphasize the symbolic nature of the gift, and stress that gift exchange is essential for personal development.

After these points have been made, a consideration of the relevant theoretical issues will be addressed. The Confucian stance will be assessed in light of an important essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson that discusses the ethical implications of using gifts to indebt others, and this will, in turn, provide grist for considerations of indebtedness, reciprocity, and generosity.

I.

Mauss observes that in archaic cultures—such as those historically found in the South Pacific (Trobriand and Maori) and in the Pacific Northwest (Tlingit, Kwakiutl, and Haida)—gift objects exerted a certain amount of control over those who received them for, upon receiving a gift, the receiver felt compelled to counter-gift and to contribute to the general movement of the gift economy.⁴ Mauss asks, “what power resides in the

⁴ I choose Mauss' essay since it is the text that initiates modern reflections of gifts and gift exchange. Indeed, Mauss' insight into gift exchange and the relationship between the gift and monetary economies

object given that causes its recipient to pay it back” (3)? He based his answer on the report of a Maori medicine man who described the mystical power that is inherent to the gift object—its *hau*. On this account, the gift is a quasi-subject that *wants* to circulate and ultimately return to its original giver (11-12).⁵

A less controversial answer to the question can be found elsewhere in the essay, for Mauss argues that the gift functions as a symbol of social life that serves “to reflect somewhat directly the manner in which the subgroups in these segmented ... societies, archaic in type and constantly enmeshed with one another, feel that they are everything to one another” (33). The French anthropologist Maurice Godelier develops this insight further by arguing that the gift is not simply symbolic of society writ large, but that the gift economy of which the gift takes part actively produces social interaction. He writes, “What sets them [gifts] in motion and makes them circulate in one direction, then another, and yet, another, is each time the will of individuals and groups to establish between themselves personal bonds of solidarity and/or dependence” (101). Further,

What is produced or reproduced through the establishment of these personal bonds is all or part of the social relations which constitute the foundations of the society and which endow it with a certain overall logic that is also the source of the social identity of the member groups and individuals (102).

That is, gift giving is one of the methods that members of a culture use in order to establish, maintain, and become cognizant of the status of various social relationships.

This is because, in archaic cultures, these relationships were structured in terms of a social hierarchy that the obligations of gift exchange made explicit and often

continues to stimulate discussion (for example see Bataille 1991 and Derrida 1992). However, since Mauss based his remarks on limited data, I have chosen to supplement it with the work of Maurice Godelier whose fieldwork in Melanesia provides a foundation for the development of Mauss’ theory. For more on Mauss’ methodology see Sahlins 1991.

⁵ For more on this account see Hyde 1983, and Sahlins 1991.

exaggerated.⁶ Gift exchange instantiated a hierarchy of power and allowed the individual to conceive and express his or her place within that hierarchy. Hence, the obligation to reciprocate is generated by the collective will to maintain personal bonds and to clarify position within a specific social context.

Indeed, both sacred and secular gift exchange perform these functions. With regard to the former, a hierarchy of power and/or the acknowledgment and mitigation of debt underlie the religious sacrifice, for it expresses gratitude for what has been received from the ancestors, spirits, or gods (successful crops, hunts, wars, etc.) and secures future favors from them.⁷ The sacrifice acknowledges debt and attempts to mitigate it through the presentation and destruction of valuable objects. With regard to secular gift exchange, the creation, mitigation, and reversal of debt are manifested and these gifts are used to demonstrate social difference and to otherwise symbolize and clarify various social relationships. Secular gift exchange functions as a basic act of recognition, for “to refrain from giving, just as to refrain from accepting, is to lose rank—as is to refrain from reciprocating” (Mauss: 41). The obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate, then, manifest a hierarchy of power by establishing and reinforcing social distinctions, whether secular or sacred.⁸

Mauss goes on to claim that archaic gift exchange functioned as a “total social fact” since it expressed and manifested itself in many social institutions at the same time

⁶ For more on this see Earle 1997, Mauss 1990: 74-75, Richard 2000, and Sahlins 1972.

⁷ As Mauss notes, the sacrifice manifests and expresses a hierarchy, for “one of the first groups of beings with which men had to enter into contract with and who, by definition, were there to make a contract with them, were above all the spirits of both the dead and of the gods” and since these beings were the true owners of things in the secular world, with them “it was most necessary to exchange, and with them it was most dangerous not to exchange” (16).

⁸ Also see Mauss and Hubert 1964. No doubt, more needs to be said about the similarities and differences between sacrifice and the gift economy. They will be jointly considered here, however, a future essay will address the role played by sacrifice in the Confucian social economy.

(3-7). Those who exchanged gifts found themselves simultaneously participating in religious, juridical, moral, aesthetic, and economic institutions. Even those who utilized monetary economies relied on the gift economy to perform the political, juridical, and economic functions that would later be taken on and structured by institutionalized bureaucracies. Taking the North American potlatch as his example, Mauss argues that the practice performed an economic function since it was grounded on conceptions of value, utility, self-interest, luxury, wealth, acquisition, and consumption (78-79).⁹ It performed a juridical function since these exchanges often functioned as contracts between different parties (clans, families, etc.): it performed a political function as it structured relationships between social classes, clans, and families; and, finally, it performed an aesthetic function since the objects given were made, used, ornamented, polished, and collected, and this gave them the ability to elicit aesthetic emotions.

With this said, it should be noted that Mauss' interest in the gift economy is not purely scholarly in nature, for he holds that the contemporary tendency to conceive gift exchange primarily in terms of monetary value is in fact indicative of a general historical trend toward an instrumental reductionism. That is, Mauss argues that the abstract and reductionist nature of the monetary economy ultimately undermines the political, religious, moral, and aesthetic significance of gift exchange. The unprecedented growth of an impersonal economy led him to write the "Moral and Economic Conclusions" to his essay in which he notes that "In ancient systems of morality of the most epicurean kind it is the good and pleasurable that is sought after, and not material utility. The victory of

⁹ The potlatch was practiced by many of the tribes of the American Northwest Coast including the Nuu-Chanulth, Salish, Haida, Kwakiutl, Bella Coola, Tsimishian, and Tlingit. On these occasions, a host sought to establish and uphold his status in society by lavishing gifts on his guests. Potlatches were held in order to mark significant events including the birth of a child, a daughter's first menses or a son's marriage. For an interesting discussion see Cooper 1982.

rationalism and mercantilism was needed before the notions of profit and the individual, raised to the level of principles, were introduced” (76). This is not to say, however, that archaic gift exchange was altogether disinterested about utility, for, in many instances, it became quite antagonistic with the giver often intentionally trying to impress, outdo, and subjugate the receiver. However, for Mauss, what characterized the exchanges of the Trobriand and Maori islanders, the American Indians of the Pacific Northwest, the ancient Hindus, and the Germanic and Celtic nobles was “not the cold reasoning of the merchant, the banker, and the capitalist,” for the individuals in these cultures carried on exchange in a characteristically personal, liberal, and ultimately social manner. Mauss concludes by arguing that this conception of the gift economy should be “put into the melting pot once more,” (75) and this draws attention to the political agenda that guides his analysis. Although he remains critical of antagonist exchange, the cultural integration that characterizes total social facts appeals to him as he considers the then recent violence of the First World War. Considerations of gift exchange provide a focus for considerations of cultural phenomena that are necessary for rich social experience and personal development. I will say more about this in a moment.

II.

Before discussing the Confucian stance itself, something needs to be said about the cultural tradition appropriated by Confucius. Archeological research has shown that the “states” of the Shang dynasty (1751-1112 BC) should be understood as collections of local segmentary lineages, clans, and tribes that were centralized by a royal clan.¹⁰ The segments pledged allegiance to the royal clan but nevertheless retained a great deal of

¹⁰ One might argue that considering Shang and Zhou cultures simultaneously is disingenuous, however it is widely held that the Shang dynasty provided a cultural legacy that was adopted and developed by the

autonomy. Keightley argues that oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions reveal that the Shang state was “a thin network of pathways and encampments ... laid over a hinterland that rarely saw or felt the King’s presence and authority” (1983: 548). A sense of solidarity among the various segments was inculcated not through the use of administrative organs, but through the king’s performance of various rituals (*li*, 禮) whose social efficacy was contingent upon the widespread belief in their social and metaphysical potency. That is, the widespread dependence upon royal sacrifice was grounded on the desire to maintain good relations with the spirits and ancestors who had the power to influence the quality of weather, harvests, and war.¹¹ However, the early Chinese kings also needed to display their power, and this was done primarily through the use of an autocratic redistributive economy. A passage from the “Books of Zhou” of the *Shu Jing* states that the kings display

the things ... produced by their virtue, and [distributed them to the princes] of the States of different surnames [to encourage] them not to neglect their duties. The precious things and gems they have distributed among their uncles in charge of States, thereby increase attachment [to the throne]. The recipients have not despised the things, but have seen in them the power of virtue (Legge 1865: 346-348).

The king’s virtue could be obtained by sacrificing to the spirits and ancestors, by giving gifts to nobles and commoners, and by otherwise cultivating character through the observance of ritual propriety.¹² Echoing Mauss’ observations regarding the use of gift

ensuing dynasties. For more on the Shang cultural legacy see Chang 1976, Keightley 1988, Keightley 2000, Southall 1968, and Wheatley 1971. When possible, I will provide textual and/or archeological evidence from both dynasties in order to support this claim.

¹¹ Oracle-bone inscriptions reveal that the king’s sacrifices to ancestors and to various natural forces (wind, sun, and directional powers) were essential for maintaining social stability. For an account of these see Keightley 2000: 4-5, 11, 26-27, 33-34, 75, and 101.

¹² Keightley (1978: 551-554) argues that the display of royal power not only took the form of gift giving but also was manifested by the king’s tours which entailed continually performing sacrifices, hunting, and performing inspections in outlying areas.

exchange to generate esteem, Nivison notes the semantic link between the terms of the phrase “obtainment of virtue” for, in this system, power (*de*, 德) is obtained (*de*, 得) by the king through giving, which is seen as a virtuous act since “the felt force of the compulsion [to repay], in the receiver of the favor, is psychologically transferred to the giver, and perceived as a psychic power in the giver to elicit a response” (1978: 53). In order to understand how this redistributive economy allowed for the manifestation of political power, something must be said about the gifts that circulated therein, for the “psychic power” associated with the giving of gifts was contingent not only upon the act of giving but also upon the nature of the gifts themselves. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, gifts from the king often included meat, wine, jade, cowry shells, military gear, animals, land, and sacrificial vessels (*ding*, 鼎), and, for reasons that will become clear, this essay will focus on those of cowry shells, jade, and *ding*.¹³

The inscriptions on the *ding* of the Shang and Zhou dynasties record a vast network of donor-recipient relations which functioned to establish political obligations (Chang 1983, 95-100). *Ding* were often cast when offices were awarded to those who had demonstrated their allegiance to the royal lineage through political or military service. The inscriptions on the vessels itemize the gifts given by the king, record the celebration, and ultimately dedicate the vessel to the receiver’s ancestors (Creel 1970: 391-95). With this said, one may ask whether or not sacrificial vessels were truly gifts since it was the receiver of other gifts—the mandate, wine, cowry shells, armor—who ultimately produced them in order to commemorate the occasion. An element of gift exchange remains at work, however, for the metal needed to cast the vessel was often given by the

¹³ For a thorough account of gift exchange during this period see Cook 1997.

king and, more generally, the right to cast, inscribe, and use a vessel was a gift from the ruler who wished to solidify relationships with those he wished to incorporate into his sphere of influence (Cook: 257). This observation leads us to a consideration of the power—or *de*—of the king's *ding*, as well as the other precious objects that he gave.

The metals used in the production of bronze (copper and tin) were obtained from regions south and northeast of the Shang and Zhou empires, jade from the central plains areas, and cowry shells from the south.¹⁴ For this reason, these objects, as well as the gifts that they were transformed into (sacrificial vessels, armor, ceremonial jades, and jewelry), signified both the ability to obtain exotic goods and the ability to control resources and trade with distant regions. *Ding* and other gifts bestowed by the king were instantiations of the king's *de*, and receiving them allowed the receiver to share his power.

As discussed in the last section, Mauss observed that gifts were commonly used in archaic cultures in order to establish and maintain social hierarchies in both secular and sacred contexts. Indeed, in early China, the former was contingent upon the latter, for the king's primary duty was to maintain good relations with the spirits and ancestors and the rituals that he performed were consequently viewed as having both religious and cosmological import. Indeed, the king's gifts and sacrifices connected the secular and the sacred since his power was obtained, in part, by sacrificing to the spirits and ancestors and was displayed in the secular realm through the use of the gift economy. This relationship also marks the overlap of the moral and the political, for by promoting individuals to higher posts and by giving them gifts, the king established political obligations and duties which were in turn construed by the receiver in terms of his moral obligations to his ancestors. Indeed, since ancestor worship contextualized both secular

¹⁴ See Cook: 260, 266, Watson 1971, and Chang 1975.

and sacred gift exchange, gift giving was understood in terms of the accumulation of goods and power over generations. Hence, the *ding* that were cast in order to commemorate political advancement were dedicated to the ancestors who—in the eyes of the receiver—made such advance possible. Moreover, the sacrificial vessels performed an essential temporal function as they united the present with both the past and the future. That is, in dedicating the vessels to ancestors and in using them to continually sacrifice to them, the individual would symbolically connect the present with the past. Further, by preserving the vessels passing them on to the next generation, he would envision the future of his lineage.¹⁵

Before leaving the subject of the social function of these gifts something more should be said about the nature of them *qua* objects. Godelier argues that the objects used in both sacrifices and formal gift exchanges tend to share certain properties that render them conducive to the amassing of social value that such acts require (161-167). These objects act as substitutes for persons, attest to social power, and lend themselves to qualitative and quantitative comparison. Further, they often lack instrumental value but are high in aesthetic value.

With regard to function, sacrificial vessels, cowry shells, and jades all act as substitutes for the giver, for in the process of giving, the object is imbued with personal significance as it is seen as an expression of the giver's wishes. We have also seen that these gifts attest to the giver's socio-political and/or religious power since they require control of trade, and since they are tokens of the types that are used by the giver to

¹⁵ The Li *gui* inscription reads: “The King went to Shang Hou. Shi Yu followed the King on X [obscured graph] merit who awarded Shi Yu with metal. Yu according to rule responded [to the gift] and extolled his power (*de*). [Yu] used [the metal] to make for his Accomplished Deceased-Father a treasured sacrificial vessel. [May his] grandsons of grandsons and sons of sons treasure [it]” (Cook 1997: 267).

perform religious sacrifices. These objects also lend themselves to qualitative and quantitative comparisons, and such analysis contributes to the social value of the gift. Indeed, cowry shells, jades, and sacrificial vessels can be compared in this manner, for size, quality, and purity all contribute to a judgment of overall worth. The ability to compare such objects leads us to the characteristics that allow them to perform these functions, for comparisons can only be made by attending to the qualities that contribute to their social value.

These objects are often non-instrumental in nature, for they break ties with the routines of daily life and are sufficiently abstract to allow for the accumulation of symbolic value. The religious and socio-political value of the sacrificial vessel necessarily exceeds the instrumental value that characterizes vessels used for everyday cooking since it is simultaneously symbolic of one's allegiance to the king and to one's ancestors. The aesthetic form that contributes to the significance of these vessels will be discussed in a moment.

Whether shaped into ceremonial objects or into more abstract forms such as *bi* disks (璧), jade too takes on added social significance. Non-instrumental jades have been used in China since the Neolithic era for religious and political purposes and, in its refined state, jade can function symbolically by allowing for the ascription of predicates that are normally reserved for descriptions of human beings (Bernstein 1993). In a passage in the *Li Ji* a pupil asks Confucius why jade is valued so highly or, more specifically, whether or not its value is simply contingent upon its rarity. In responding, Confucius calls attention to jade's abstract nature by arguing that it is esteemed not because it is rare but because it embodies human virtue such as benevolence, intelligence,

righteousness, as well as beauty, and the comment demonstrates that refined jade—jade that is characteristically smooth, translucent, and unyieldingly hard—readily lends itself to symbolization (Legge 1885: XLV: XIII, 464).¹⁶

The beauty of polished jade leads us to the aesthetic qualities of these objects. Cowries, like jade, were commonly valued for their form, texture, color, and sheen. Sacrificial vessels were also valued since they were designed with attention to line and form and were otherwise decorated with complex patterns and shapes. In both ceremonial jades and sacrificial vessels a great deal of attention is paid to form and ornamentation: various shapes, geometric patterns, and motifs contribute to the object's aesthetic value. Moreover, upon viewing them, one is struck with the attention that is given to overall symmetrical organization, an organization that is perhaps indicative of the Shang and Zhou emphasis on structuring experience (see Keightley 1978).

With this said, I would like to close this section by saying something about the appropriation and modification of this tradition by the early Confucians. After the fall of the Zhou dynasty a movement away from a ritualized political system began. There are two points that concern us here. The first is that, with regard to the gift economy, the inalienable gifts that secured and manifested royal power became increasingly alienable in nature. That is, as access to the methods of metallurgy as well as access to other previously unattainable goods grew, dependence upon the king's gifts decreased. One could attain jades, cowries, and even cast sacrificial vessels without relying on the charity

¹⁶ The reader will note that I have discussed the social significance of ritual vessels and jades but have said nothing regarding that of cowry shells. This gap is explained by the fact that the social significance of the latter remains unclear. It is clear that *C. annulus* and *C. moneta* were used during the Shang and Zhou dynasties in order to decorate human clothing, horse regalia, and were offered to ancestors in sacrifice (see Chang 1980: 155). Their social significance may be explained by their association with notions of fertility or spiritual power (see Cook 1997: 260-262).

of the king (Cook: 289-90). Secondly, the alienation of the king's gifts was, in fact, not inconsistent with Confucius' project. In order to make this point something needs to be said about the Confucian appropriation of ritual action.

In one sense, *li* entail the rites performed by the king and the royal family. For this reason we have been considering gift exchange in the context of characteristically formal ceremonies: sacrifices, promotions, celebrations, and so on. However, Confucius initiated a secularization of the *li* that expanded its scope to include all who inhabit a given community, and this transformed the traditional understanding of ritual action into one that entails the wide-spread performance of social etiquette. Consequently, the ability of gift exchange to form and maintain social relationships was emphasized. The gifts given by the king capitalized on the power of the gift to establish and maintain relationships with nobles and lineages that constituted the kingdom, and Confucius saw that it was essential to utilize this power in the course of everyday life in order to achieve social harmony or *he* (和).¹⁷ This transition can be made clearer by briefly examining the three obligations that Mauss saw as working in any instance of gift exchange and by examining Confucius' practice of gift exchange as described in the *Analects* or *LunYu* (論語).¹⁸

It was briefly mentioned in Section One that there are three obligations that characterize any instance of gift exchange: the obligation to give, the obligation to

¹⁷ For more on *he* see Li 2006.

¹⁸ I should say that I will be focusing my attention upon early Confucianism as represented in the *Analects* (Ames and Rosemont 1998). I will periodically add footnotes that refer to Mencius' understanding of the gift economy, but I will give no extensive treatment of Mencius per se. Indeed, a thorough treatment of Mencius' stance would require a separate essay, for it would require a discussion of his accounts of human nature and moral cultivation. Of course, there would be overlap but one would need to frame the discussion in terms of innate moral impulses and this would lead me away from my central concern. For more on Mencius' articulation of the Confucian tradition see Ivanhoe 2002.

receive, and the obligation to reciprocate. We have also seen that the situatedness of those who give and receive—that is, their position in a hierarchy of social roles—informs these obligations. In this context, gift exchange both facilitates movement among positions and, via recognition, aids in solidifying them once they have been attained. In a more general way, the obligations of gift exchange are characteristic of the need to maintain social ties within the context of a relational ethic, for, regardless of one's position or status, to ignore the obligations imposed by the gift exchange is to ignore the value of social relationships. Hence, in the *Analects* 6.5 we find Confucius advising his household servant to share the grain that he has earned with all of those who make up his social network: his family, friends, and neighbors. The obligation to give is informed by the obligations that have been created through interpersonal relationships: familial, fraternal, and communal. Here, the servant is indebted to his network for economically and socially supporting him at all stages of his development. Further, in 1.9, 2.5, and 3.12 we find Confucius emphasizing the importance of remaining circumspect when performing funerary services and sacrifices for ancestors since doing so is an essential aspect of ritual propriety. More specifically, in keeping with his emphasis on performing rituals in a genuine spirit, he stresses that performing sacrifices without full attention to detail is akin to not sacrificing at all. On this account, gift exchange must not be performed mindlessly or purely out of a sense of duty, but the individual must perform the ritual with full attention being paid to the social significance of the act.

In 7.7 Confucius simultaneously expresses his willingness to educate and his willingness to accept even meager gifts from students who lack material wealth. In this case, a subordinate offers a gift to a superior. On the other hand, in 10.18 Confucius'

superior—his lord—presents him with a gift and Confucius characteristically follows the proper etiquette that manifests deference and respect for the giver's social standing: he embodies this attitude by bowing (*bai*, 拜) when he receives the gift. However, in 10.23 it is stressed that he did not bow when receiving gifts from friends *unless* they gave meat that could be used for ritual sacrifice. This example shows that a gift that can be used for a sacrifice inverts standard protocol (in this case, not bowing to one's peers) since the intended use of the gift is construed in terms of the receiver's dependence upon their ancestors.¹⁹

In sum, these passages show Confucius practicing gift exchange within the broader context of the etiquette of ritual propriety which entails acknowledging and manifesting social distinctions and deferring to one's cultural tradition. Confucius held that the sacred was immanent in the secular and that sacred rites were intertwined with secular etiquette.²⁰ Hence, sacrificing to one's ancestors is seen as an act that expresses one's dependence upon them, and more mundane exchanges take on added significance since they are seen as aiding in the formation and maintenance of social relationships and ultimately as contributing to realizing social harmony that ideally comes about through the wide-spread practice of ritual. On this view, gift exchange is sacred since any particular exchange is seen as emblematic of a cultural tradition and as essential for bringing about a good state. This returns me to the issue of the inalienability of the gift.

It was mentioned that the inalienability of the king's gifts and sacrifices was essential for their religious, moral, political, and aesthetic efficacy. The objects sacrificed

¹⁹ For Mencius on exchanges between friends see Legge 1970: 4B6, 376-379 where Mencius argues that the respect shown by inferiors to superiors (and vice-versa) in the exchange of gifts is an example of an appropriateness that acknowledges the other's social status. However, with regard to gifts exchanged among friends, he argues that the social status of the other remains unimportant.

²⁰ For more see Fingarette 1972

or given by the king were all symbolic in a manner that distinguished them from everyday objects and the instrumental logic that such objects instantiate.²¹ Confucius' attitude toward gift exchange demonstrates that secular gift exchange retains its inalienability, for it retains its ability to manifest the sacred, where "sacred" is understood as indicative of humanity writ large. On this account, the gift is inalienable since it is seen as manifesting a tradition of exchange that extends into the distant past and since the gift itself is seen as having the power to establish and maintain a hierarchy of social relationships, a hierarchy that Confucius saw as essential for the flourishing of any state. On this view, the significance of gift exchange radiates well beyond the confines of the present moment, for any specific instance of gift exchange has the capacity to articulate a cultural legacy.²²

III.

What, then, does Confucian ethics reveal about the appropriate performance of gift exchange and what does this stance reveal about the tradition? As discussed in the introduction, difficulties arise when one considers how a temporally distant culture can be successfully appropriated in modern contexts. Mauss argues that the inherent structure of gift exchange appears to be universal and that any contemporary culture will be able to find a moment in its history when the gift economy performed an essential sociological function. Hence, regardless of cultural context, gifts will be used in religious

²¹ Several passages from the *Li Ji* further support this claim. Part III, I:IX, 104 states: "A superior man, though poor, will not sell his vessels of sacrifice; though suffering from cold, he will not wear his sacrificial robes." In Part III, IX: IV-VII, pp. 443-444 we find that the ethereal smells of the sacrifice (of flesh, millet-spirits, and rice) were valued by the ancients—instead of the objects themselves.

²² Taking the gifts that Confucius gave and accepted as an example (sacrificial meat, grain, and live animals) one might argue the emphasis on their social significance since they were practical objects primarily characterized by their instrumental value. However, for Confucius, these seemingly mundane useful objects were understood as elements of ritual practice that act as the foundation culture. They consequently took on a sacred character.

and secular contexts and, more specifically, every culture will have a framework that delineates the obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate and further, there will be a tacit distinction between alienable and inalienable gifts. On this account, then, gift exchange is an essential component of the human condition.

Further, it can be shown that the issue of alienability and/or the instrumental use of gift exchange remains relevant in modern contexts. More specifically, there are two parts to this issue that are still relevant for moderns: the nature of the gift object itself and the manner in which it is given—let us say, the form and content of gift exchange, respectively.

To be sure, the alienability of goods poses a pressing problem, for it is a symptom of the general commodification of goods, services, and labor. Capitalist economies exaggerate the problem of alienability as they construe value primarily in terms of monetary value even if the object in question resists such construal. In this system, inalienable objects such as works of art, religious icons, and historical relics have price tags affixed to them as they are commodified and pulled into a universal system of impersonal exchange. This clearly has bearing on gift exchange, for it has been shown that gift exchange performs an important social function and that that function is dependent both upon the quality of the exchange and the inalienability of the gift object. It is for this reason that Emerson addresses the problem of alienability and goes on to express the requirement that the giver be personally invested in the gift:

The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me.
Therefore the poet brings his poem, the shepherd his lamb;
the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem ... This is right and pleasing,
for it restores society in so far to the primary basis, when a
man's biography is conveyed in his gift, and every man's wealth
is an index of his merit. But it is a cold lifeless business when

you go to the shops to buy me something which does not represent your life and talent, but a goldsmith's (403).

This is not to say that alienable gifts necessarily lose their status as gifts, for gifts of standardized objects are given quite often and, indeed, gifts of money—the alienable gift par excellence—are often given to celebrate various occasions.²³ Emerson points out that such gifts are lacking something essential, for if the gift is to express personal relationships, then the introduction of anonymity into the equation—through the use of money and/or through the labor of others—threatens this ability. Further, there is the issue, raised by Mauss, that the general dominance of an impersonal economy undermines the ability of the gift to function as a total social fact, for in advocating impersonal universal principles of exchange, such an economy limits the moral, political, and aesthetic significance of the gift. Mauss does not advocate a return to the ways of archaic cultures, but, again, he stresses that gift exchange could potentially avoid the complete reduction to impersonal exchange if the gift economies of these cultures are studied. With this said, how can the moral, aesthetic, religious, and political significance of gift exchange be preserved so that the ability to enter into socially significant relationships with others can be maintained?

The moral and political significance of gift exchange becomes evident when one keeps in mind the gift's broad social significance. That is, if gift exchange is seen as manifesting social relationships, then it will be seen as essential for the process of maintaining ties with individuals and communities. The gift becomes symbolic of one's commitment to a community and, more generally, to a relational ethic. As intimated in

²³ This is a complex issue that warrants an extended treatment. I assert that gifts of money are not necessarily impersonal in nature but agree with Emerson that gifts that introduce an element of impersonality into the equation are not as effective in actualizing the social ends of gift exchange as those that do not. For more on this issue see Parry 1989.

the last section, for Confucian ethics, the scope of gift exchange extends beyond the individual as it emphasizes that the individual is indebted to others, to one's community, to the traditions that one participates in and preserves, and ultimately to one's culture. The exchange of gifts focuses the field of indebtedness by drawing attention to the "gifts" that one receives and that are necessary for one's social development. Again, this is why, for Confucius, gift exchange is a sacred affair.

Further, for the early Confucians, this attitude necessarily has political significance as politics is seen as growing out of familial and fraternal relationships. When, in *Analects* 2.21, Confucius is questioned about his lack of official position he replies that in being filial to his parents and in befriending his brothers he is carrying out the work of government, and in doing so he expresses the conviction that a good state must be grounded in harmonious social relationships. Since such relationships can only come about through the practice of ritual and since gift exchange is an element of ritual practice, gift giving, on this account, necessarily has political import.

Aesthetic significance was mentioned when discussing the beauty of sacrificial objects and, speaking more generally, an object's beauty contributes to the gift's ritual significance since it facilitates the object's ability to become symbolic of human value. In the secular realm gifts need not necessarily have obvious aesthetic value, but such value can only aid in clarifying the social aims of the gift.²⁴ In addition, Confucius holds that any ritual act is aesthetically significant if it is performed in "good form," that is, human behavior can have good form if it matches widely practiced standards of etiquette.

²⁴ This seems to be why Emerson argues that flowers make excellent gifts, for they "are a proud assertion that a ray of beauty outvalues all the utilities of the world" (402). This "ray of beauty" is essential not only because it resists a base instrumentalism but also because it allows individuals to express and symbolize relationships. More will be said on this in a moment.

Along these lines, Emerson noted that “He is a good man who can receive a gift well” (404) and this implores us to recall the manner in which Confucius practiced gift exchange, for his actions instantiated a tradition that entailed molding one’s response to reflect the status of the giver. Confucius’ comportment and attitude were brought into accord with the social standing of the giver, whether superior, inferior, or equal. Further, the aesthetic significance of gift exchange not only grows out of giving and receiving in good form (at the right time, in the right manner, etc.), for it is also dependent upon the manner in which an individual personalizes the traditions of gift exchange. On this account, each individual will follow the same standards but will find a way to personalize them in a way that will reflect his or her overall style of acting. In practicing the etiquette of gift giving, the individual will find ways to personalize it by using it as a means of self-expression, that is, by finding ways to personalize the manner in which one gives, receives, and chooses gifts. Hence, the aesthetic significance of gift exchange is not solely dependent upon bringing one’s actions into accord with standards but also upon finding a way to articulate them in a way that expresses one’s individuality.

These comments raise a question regarding which system of etiquette is the most suitable for the social ends that gift exchange can actualize. The early Confucians held that a clear hierarchy of social roles provides the only suitable context for gift exchange. One may be sympathetic to this idea and go on to argue that every culture is in fact constituted by hierarchical relationships such as those between father and son, mother and daughter, elder and younger, leader and supporter, etc., but difficulties arise when one takes into account the problems that are often associated with the institution of rather

rigid social hierarchies. These are problems that will not be addressed here.²⁵ However, what can be gleaned from early Confucian discourse is its emphasis on manifesting good form within a particular tradition of ritualistic gift exchange and the use of such exchange to establish, maintain, and develop social relationships. We have seen that good form is outlined by a system of etiquette and this discloses the possibility of magnifying the socialization process as it allows participants to become cognizant of the richness of social intercourse.

Confucian ethics demonstrates how gift exchange can retain its religious, moral, political, and aesthetic significance and consequently shows how the gift economy can be saved from the instrumental logic characteristic of the monetary economy. This, then, is the first component of an ethic of gift exchange as articulated by a relational ethic: the gift must be socially significant and/or must contribute to the process of forming and maintaining social relationships and communities. This necessitates practicing a gift giving etiquette that guarantees the form of such exchanges and allows for the aesthetic articulation of a tradition. It also necessitates remaining cognizant of the importance or social gravity of the gift economy. The second component concerns the unethical use of gift exchange.

The reader may have, in a skeptical vein, realized that the discussion thus far has been optimistic, for gift exchange can always be used in morally questionable, if not detestable, ways. That is, in giving one can seduce, subdue, blackmail, slander, or disqualify another. Now, it is also clear that a relational ethic would remain critical of this kind of giving since it is anathema to the social ends that it espouses. For this reason I will not address the matter in any detail beyond saying that such antagonistic use is akin

²⁵ I refer the reader to Ames and Hall (1990: 79-100) and Li (2000) for discussions of this issue.

to, if not an aggravated form of, a base instrumentalism. When gifts are used not to develop and express human sentiment but to advance one's personal interests and/or to control others, then the exchange is no longer gift exchange proper.²⁶ With this said, a concern remains regarding the possibly violent nature of even morally laudable instances of gift exchange. Mauss and Godelier draw a distinction between antagonistic and non-antagonistic exchanges, antagonistic exchanges (such as the potlatch) aggravating social hierarchies through competition in which individuals continually strive to outdo one another in order to attain social status (see Mauss: 33-39 and Godelier: 77-85). This battle of generosity often reaches absurd ends including the destruction of wealth. Regardless of this distinction, however, a more general claim can be made that *any* instance of gift exchange is antagonistic in nature since it entails the three obligations outlined in Section Two.

Indeed, in non-antagonistic exchanges it appears that the reception of a gift creates a debt and asserts dominance over the receiver even if the giver is well intentioned. Reminiscent of his views on self-reliance, Emerson writes:

The law of benefits is a difficult channel, which requires careful sailing or rude boats. It is not the office of man to receive gifts. How dare you give them? We wish to be self-sustained. We do not quite forgive a giver. The hand that feeds us is in some danger of being bitten (403).

Tension is created when, for Emerson, a self-sufficient individual is presented with a gift that indebts him in an unflattering manner.²⁷ And yet the obligation to receive the gift

²⁶ Mayfair Yang (1994: 49-63) discusses the concern of many contemporary Chinese mainlanders regarding such questionable uses of gift exchange. This concern is preceded by the Confucian criticism of preoccupation with profit. For example see *Analects* 4:12, 4:16, 7:11, and 7:16. Also see *Mencius* 1A1 and 2B10. For another contemporary perspective see Steidlmeier 1999.

²⁷ Aristotle echoes this sentiment: "It is more characteristic of virtue to do good than to have good done to one ... and it is not hard to see that giving implies doing good and doing what is noble, and taking implies having good done to one or not acting basely" (985).

remains, for to deny it is to explicitly rebuke the giver and to implicitly deny the principle of social exchange that gift exchange is grounded upon. This further explains Emerson's comment that only a good man can receive a gift well, for in doing so, he finds a way to plot a course through these morally troubling waters.²⁸

In the *Analects* we also find Confucius expressing reservations about gift exchange. In 10.16 he accepts a gift of medicine from his lord with the proper etiquette, but he goes on to express his unwillingness to use it. This may be because he is suspicious of foul play and/or it may be that, on principle, he does not take medicine unless he is quite familiar with its capacities and effects. Regardless, his reservations illustrate the point that gift exchange need not be practiced mindlessly and that there may be exceptions with regard to the use of the gifts even if they are given by superiors.²⁹ Emerson's skepticism is stronger than that of Confucius however, since he holds that even benevolently given gifts entail unjustified subordination. Further, he goes on to argue that danger also arises when, as described in *Analects* 10.16, a superior gives to an inferior, for this often engenders resentment. He goes on to say that "It is a great happiness to get off without injury and heart-burning from one who has had the ill-luck to be served by you. It is a very onerous business, this of being served, and the debtor

²⁸ Of course, one way to avoid this difficulty is to reciprocate the gift in kind. That is, upon receiving the gift, one can quickly make a return of equal value and this allows one to simultaneously negate any obligation and to avoid rebuking the giver. The difficulty is that when this occurs, the "gift" loses its social significance and the exchange becomes a mere trade of goods. This demonstrates that the true gift is inextricably linked with the notion of indebtedness. More will be said on this in a moment.

²⁹ Mencius discusses the difficulties associated with receiving questionable gifts in several places. In 4B4 a student asks whether or not gifts from rulers, when given inappropriately, should be declined. Mencius replies that to do so would be disrespectful, and he goes on to add that even Confucius would accept a gift from a morally questionable ruler as long as the gift was given according to the dictates of ritual propriety. However, in 2B3, a student questions Mencius on why he accepted gifts from some kings but refused gifts from others. Mencius replies that gifts should only be accepted when they meet a specific need (such as travel expenses or security), for otherwise they are simply bribes. Likewise, in 4B6, Mencius argues that it is inappropriate for a scholar to accept stipends from a king if the king will not utilize his skills by placing him in office.

naturally wishes to give you a slap” (404). On this account, the virtue of charity is difficult to enact since it manifests a power relationship that can set both giver and receiver ill-at-ease. Further, these difficulties are often exacerbated by the intentions and expectations of both parties, for “the expectation of gratitude is mean, and is continually punished by the total insensibility of the obliged” (404). That is, in many instances, the giver expects gratitude in response to his charity and if this expectation is not met, then the “gift” he has given does not function properly.³⁰ On the other hand, the receiver’s expectation of or demand for the gift likewise can threaten the exchange if it forces the potential giver to give. I raise this issue since the relational ethic outlined by Confucius emphasizes the maintenance of a rather rigid hierarchy of social relationships, and it seems that the gift economy that it advocates exacerbates the problem of antagonistic exchange since it stresses that superiors and inferiors should be clearly delineated and that gift exchange is an appropriate method for drawing such social distinctions.³¹ The question that concerns us is whether or not gift exchange can avoid the dialectic of superior and inferior that often leads to a blatantly instrumental use of gift exchange.

Emerson thinks that the root of either kind of discord is based in the fact that there is ultimately “no commensurability between a man and any gift” (405). He continues by noting that “We can rarely strike a direct stroke, but must be content with an oblique one; we seldom have the satisfaction of yielding a direct benefit which is directly received” (405). The alterity or “otherness” of the other cannot be mitigated by the exchange of

³⁰ This leads Derrida (1992) to the conclusion that the gift is an *aporia*, that is, the only true gift is one that neither the giver nor the receiver is aware of. Of course, this is impossible.

³¹ The *Li Ji* is full of examples that illustrate the ability of the gift (and ritual action in general) to draw social distinctions among superiors and inferiors. For example, a passage in Book XIII outlines which gifts should be given on occasion of death and burial as well as the manner in which they should be given. See Part IV, XIV: XXVIII-XXXV, 144-148.

gifts. Religious sacrifice clearly demonstrates this, for the right ritual can be performed at the right time, but the spirits and ancestors often remain fickle and unpredictable: the sacrifice never creates a completely symmetrical relationship. Indeed, there is also something asymmetrical about social relationships, for the other can be familiar, but a transcendent remainder continually escapes one's grasp.³² The gift—with its logic of obligations—attempts to mitigate this difficulty but it can never do so completely. This difficulty does not negate the importance of gift exchange, however, but makes it all the more necessary.

Our analysis of gift objects demonstrates how gifts can mitigate this problem. Beautiful or non-instrumental objects lend themselves to symbolism, a symbolism that is essential in negating the dominance of use value. The transcendence of the other demands that gifts be exchanged in order to manifest and symbolize relationships that are always, in some sense, asymmetrical and opaque. In addition, this transcendence also stipulates that the gifts exchanged not instantiate a base instrumentalism that would reduce the gift to a simple commodity. That is, since the other is transcendent, gift exchange is akin to religious sacrifice in that the giver must give objects that acknowledge the other's alterity. When seen this way, the obligations associated with gift exchange become essential for enacting social relationships. The logic of obligation is a symbolic mode of communication between individuals that allows them to express their respective conceptions of their relationship to one another. When used this way, gift exchange does not function as a means of controlling others but functions by honoring their individuality and by otherwise acknowledging the value of the relationship itself. Ideally, this is enacted in a personal manner as both giver and receiver express gratitude

³² See Levinas 1969 and Goux 2002.

for the relationship, all the while noting that the gift object itself is only symbolic of a personal debt. In an essay on faithfulness and gratitude, Georg Simmel observes that gratitude consists

not in the return of a gift, but in the consciousness that it cannot be returned, that there is something which places the receiver into a certain permanent position with respect to the giver, and makes him dimly envisage the inner infinity of a relation that can neither be exhausted nor realized by any finite return gift or other activity (392).

With this said, one may object that an understanding of gratitude that hinges upon the notion of alterity is inconsistent with the Confucian practice of gift exchange since the Confucian approach stresses a social self that is construed largely in terms of overt external behavior.³³ The alterity of the other cannot be reduced to overt behavior however, and this is at odds with an ethic that continually stresses bringing one's dispositions into accord with one's actions and provides clear guidelines for action. I cannot fully address this problem in this context since to do so would necessitate a thorough analysis of the Confucian account of the self. Nevertheless, the notion of the alterity of the other as disclosed in the exchange of gifts must be accounted for.

One could reply by arguing that the social hierarchy instituted by the exchange of gifts entails an element of alterity since the roles that constitute the hierarchy establish differences between individuals. If this is so, then, in giving a gift to a superior (say, my father), I will acknowledge our respective positions and yet, at the same time, the gift will express and symbolize our relationship. In this way the presentation of the gift simultaneously acknowledges differences in social standing but also functions by enriching and clarifying relationships.

³³ For more on the Confucian account of the self see Ames and Hall 1998: 23-44.

This response will not do, however, since the distinctions that outline social roles do not go far enough in capturing the alterity of the other. That is, the asymmetry is due not to a social difference but to a metaphysical difference, for the consciousness of the other can never be my own. Moreover, the appeal to social roles is not sufficient since gifts can be given among friends and in these cases social distinctions, ideally, play no part.³⁴

Indeed, the alterity of the other is acknowledged by Confucius when he discusses the authentic attitude that one must take in practicing rituals, and when he expresses wariness upon receiving a questionable gift. Entailed by these actions is the observation that any ritual can be performed un-authentically or can be used for nefarious purposes. In acknowledging that rituals can be performed mindlessly or purely out of habit, Confucius observes that one's intent need not match one's action and this disparity produces the opacity of the gift exchange. On the giving end, one can sacrifice to the ancestors purely out of habit and one can practice gift exchange simply by going through the socially prescribed motions. In either case it will appear that the giver is acting appropriately, but the observer cannot know for sure. With regard to the receiving end, Emerson observes that it is difficult to "strike a direct stroke" with the gift and this is because it is impossible to be absolutely clear about the receiver's response. She may very well accept the gift and even reciprocate according to the standards of etiquette, but the exchange may be—for her—joyous, irritating, or simply a bland formality that must

³⁴ Because Confucius stresses a hierarchy of social roles, early in this section I focused on the use of gift exchange to instantiate such a hierarchy. However, Mencius' and Emerson's comments on gift exchange also raise the issue of exchanges among equals such as friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Again, the point that I am making here is that the notion of equals is undercut by the alterity of the other and that gift exchange must take such difference into account. Consequently, the obligation to acknowledge the other is first an ontological affair that has little to do with the social roles that he or she plays. Hence, Confucius' insight that gift exchange is necessary for social harmony is correct, however, this does not entail that social harmony is rooted in a clearly delineated system of social roles.

be endured. Again, we cannot be sure.

As mentioned, this opacity is also apparent when the gift is used by the giver in a purely self-interested fashion. Gift exchange can, on the surface, appear to be conducive to social ends, but time may reveal that the giver was solely interested in promoting himself. In such cases intention again does not match overt action since the giver appears to be practicing a socially laudable ritual, but he is in fact taking advantage of the form of exchange in order to win the favor of the receiver so that his own interests may be advanced.

Moreover, this ambiguity also arises when gifts are exchanged among friends. Indeed, there can be no end to the exchange of gifts among peers, for relationships must be continually affirmed. This is both because they naturally change through time and, more generally, because one can never be absolutely clear about the other's understanding of the relationship. Gifts must be exchanged in order to symbolize and clarify relationships and to otherwise reaffirm one's commitment to them. Indeed, the rituals of exchange encourage this as they outline proper times for giving, that is, by prescribing that gifts regularly be given in order to celebrate specific occasions, they provide opportunities for the affirmation and clarification of the relationship.

These brief remarks show that the notion of alterity is consistent with a Confucian account of gift exchange, for it discloses that the impetus for the exchange is characteristically social in nature. Further, an awareness of the symbolic function of the gift brings attention to the asymmetrical aspects of relationships which consequently produces a sense of gratitude for them. Indeed, if a relationship were purely symmetrical in nature, then the gift would be unnecessary (there would be nothing to symbolize) and

the relationship would have little value, for the other would be identical to the self.

Of course, the Confucian account of ritual action emphasizes that the disparity between intention and action interferes with the ability of ritualized action to promote social harmony. An analysis of gift exchange, on the contrary, reveals that the alterity of the other provides the impetus for the exchange of gifts and, in general, allows one to become aware of the debts that one owes to others—debts that can never be fully mitigated by the gift. Alterity simultaneously implores the giver to give and allows her to see that what she gives can never cancel her social debt. Consequently, even though the notion of alterity, on the surface, seems opposed to the Confucian framing of ritual action, it is clear that an awareness of it contributes to the general ability of gift exchange to disclose one's dependence upon others.

This also explains why strict reciprocity is at odds with gift exchange. Again, it was mentioned that one may avoid the obligations that the gift entails by immediately giving a gift in return. In doing so, one also avoids rebuking the giver since one does not refuse the gift that he presents. The difficulty is that this reduces gift exchange to a trade of goods. In quickly counter-gifting one nullifies any debt, but as discussed above, one of the functions of gift exchange is to allow for expressions of gratitude and indebtedness. Indeed, becoming aware of the “gifts” that one accrues from one's family, community, and culture allows one to appreciate the significance of social experience. The trade is symmetrical in that goods of equal value are exchanged and this is at odds with the asymmetrical nature of one's relationship with the other or with the institutions that one participates in and benefits from.³⁵

³⁵ This is not to say that reciprocity is always suspect since it is intimately connected with ritual action generally. It is to say that the strict reciprocity that utilizes calculation in order to avoid obligation is

This returns us to the issue of antagonistic exchange, for Emerson argues that the gift is threatening since it has the ability to indebt the receiver in an unflattering matter. This is exaggerated in instances of impersonal exchange since such exchanges do not manifest a relationship that has any kind of history. We found Confucius accepting gifts not only from friends but also from political patrons to which he had no close personal ties and this raises an issue regarding the nature of comparatively impersonal exchanges. To put it another way, it could be argued that gifts are often used to establish and maintain rather impersonal relationships and this seems to disallow the kind of gift exchange that I am considering and consequently undermines my response to the violence of the gift. There are two reasons, however, why I think that this point is unconvincing.

To reiterate a point made a moment ago, for Confucius, secular and impersonal exchanges of gifts are sacred affairs. This is because gift exchange, like all forms of ritual action, carries on a cultural legacy and because it presents participants with the opportunity to actively participate in and contribute to the creation of a social order. It is true that these kinds of exchanges may be impersonal in nature, but they avoid the reduction to instrumentalism when they are seen as instantiating a widely practiced social practice and, moreover, as carrying on a cultural tradition. On this view, the symbolic aspects of gift exchange function in impersonal exchanges and this allows one to construe the exchange as presenting one with the chance to express gratitude for one's cultural traditions.

consistent with a market economy and inconsistent with a relational ethic such as that espoused by Confucius. To put it another way, such an exchange allows one to simply "go through the motions" of gift exchange without allowing the exchange to manifest social, aesthetic, and moral value. I will have more to say on reciprocity and ritual action in a forthcoming essay.

The second reason concerns the ability to refuse the gift or, more specifically, to deny the obligation to receive or reciprocate. As discussed earlier, gift exchange creates obligations but they do not approach the status of law. Indeed, the receiver has freedom with regard to what is given in return and with regard to how much time is taken before a response is given. This freedom is essential for maintaining the social function of gift exchange and for otherwise avoiding instrumental reductionism. At the extreme, the receiver can refuse the gift and rebuke the giver for using the gift in a blatantly instrumental fashion. He or she may also accept the gift but refuse to reciprocate, thereby disregarding the debt imposed by the gift. In either case, the individual is not unwillingly forced to submit to an inappropriate gift.

Another point that we must take into account pertains to the assumptions that underlie Emerson's claim. His concern regarding the violence of the gift is based in a specific logic of gift exchange, one that entails the law of equal return as well as the notion that the debtor is obliged to repay the gift. Indeed, this harkens back to Mauss' point regarding the relationship between the gift and monetary economies, for the gift economy is often construed within the context of a dominant market economy that outlines clear rules of exchange. When gift exchange is construed in terms of contracts and the law of equal return, gifts become threatening since they appear to have the power to bind individuals in ways that they find undesirable. This often produces guilt, for the receiver is conscious of the fact that the giver is indeed waiting for the debt to be honored. Emerson's concern, then, is an expression of the "calculating attitude" that Mauss found so distressing.

The subjectivity that Emerson describes is one that is wary of being indebted and

controlled by others. In keeping with his emphasis on self-reliance, gift exchange is seen as threatening for an autonomous self that continually strives to retain its individuality. Contrary to this, a relational ethic holds that gift giving is an essential component of a broader set of ritualized actions that allows individuals to develop within a well-defined and supportive social context. On this account, gift exchange is not at odds with the subject since he or she is seen as arising out of and continually dependent upon a nexus of social relationships. In fact, gift exchange, and the performance of ritual action generally, presents the individual with the possibility of developing and articulating a self. For an account that sees the self as socially constructed, gift exchange is seen as yet another chance to find a place within a culture and to find an authentic manner in which to make it one's own. Hence, on this account, the individual uses gifts to establish and maintain relationships and acknowledges his or her dependence upon various communities and ultimately upon the culture that those communities develop within.³⁶

Before closing I would like to briefly examine two consequences of the stance outlined above. The first is that an analysis of gift exchange provides insight into the manner in which individuals and cultures understand and appraise the exchange of goods. As Emerson demonstrates, such understanding is grounded in notions of the self and notions concerning the nature of the relationship between self and other. Since a relational ethic will see the self as arising out of and continually depending upon its social context, it will stress the ability of the gift to establish, maintain, and develop relationships. Further, it will stress indebtedness and will see the exchange of gifts as an opportunity to express the relevant sentiments. Further, like Mauss, this approach will

³⁶ This approach is akin to that of Helene Cixous who seeks to criticize the notion of the self that underlies assumptions such as those held by Emerson. See Schrift 1997: 148-173.

advocate that the social economy must not be reduced to a universal system of exchange that ignores the ability of the former to manifest moral, aesthetic, and political value.

Secondly, the analysis demonstrates that Confucian ethics will encourage the development of the virtue most often associated with one's practice of the social economy—generosity. In the *Lunyu* we saw Confucius encouraging his house servant to share his grain stipend with his community and, more generally, we find him consistently remaining critical of those who meticulously calculate what will be in their best interests. Generosity grows out of an awareness of one's indebtedness to one's community and to the cultural traditions that one participates in. One can check self-interest by appreciating one's indebtedness and this will, in turn, provide a foundation for the appreciation of the indebtedness of others. It is for this reason that Confucius, in 5.24, criticizes a Weisheng Gao for responding to a beggar's request for vinegar by begging it from his own neighbors. Weisheng misses the chance to help someone in need and, stranger still, sees nothing wrong with shifting the burden onto his neighbors. This leads me to suggest that gift exchange is not limited to the exchanges described above—exchanges among those in a social hierarchy and those among friends—but must also be extended to those who have little. On the Confucian account, the spirit of the gift is rooted in a sense of indebtedness and this necessitates that one give regardless of the social position of the other. Generosity is necessitated by an ethic that construes the individual as dependent upon cultural traditions and personal relationships.³⁷

IV.

³⁷ Indeed, there is more to say on the matter since one may counter that this approach may encourage the “free rider problem,” that is, the difficulty presented by those who do not or cannot reciprocate the gifts that they receive. This problem can only be addressed after an analysis of the Confucian stance on reciprocity is advanced. For more on the free rider problem see Ostrom and Walker 2003.

This essay has utilized the principles of the gift economy outlined by Mauss and Godelier to analyze the gift economy as practiced and advocated by Confucius. These include the notion of the total social fact and the use of the gift economy to instantiate a social hierarchy through the creation of obligations. It was shown that the relational ethic advocated by the early Confucians entails using gift exchange in order to simultaneously draw social distinctions between individuals and to draw them into a common social economy. However, it was also shown that this economy has moral, political, and aesthetic significance since the objects that circulate within it function symbolically. This kind of exchange accrues human value since it is oriented toward the other and is consequently opposed to that exchange that is oriented toward material profit and/or self-interest.

This essay has also analyzed a specific social ritual and has shown that the Confucian articulation of that ritual remains relevant for contemporary practice. Like Mauss' work, this tradition encourages us to envision gift exchange as a means of practicing humanity, but it goes further by emphasizing the sacred nature of a seemingly secular practice. That is, gift exchange becomes sacred when it is construed as allowing individuals to express a historical tradition and as allowing them to actively participate in sustaining culture. Generally speaking, this approach stresses that we pay attention to the weighty social significance of gift exchange. I have tried to extend this further by arguing that on a personal level, the gift exchange allows one to acknowledge and symbolize one's relationship with the other and to develop an awareness of alterity. Our relationships with others demand that gifts be given in a generous spirit, for such relationships are themselves gifts that create a debt that can never be fully settled. When

construed in terms of a relational ethic, this debt does not place an unbearable weight on the shoulders of the receiver, but allows him or her to acknowledge the rich complexity of his or her relationships with others.

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