

Postmodern Ethics

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Reciprocity may be immediate or delayed; specific or generalized. Reciprocity of *a business transaction*, for instance, is both immediate and specific. The exchange of services must occur either simultaneously or be completed on a clearly stated date, and the services exchanged must be seen by both sides as by and large balancing each other out within this transaction here and now. A business transaction is a self-enclosed episode; calculation of its propriety is neither affected by past transactions nor does it temper or otherwise prejudice future ones. Each business transaction starts, so to speak, in a void, and ends there. It is difficult to confuse business with moral relationships; at the utmost, one can say (as Durkheim did when he insisted on 'noncontractual conditions of contract') that without trusting the partner's readiness to keep his word and to act on his promises - often represented as the sign of moral rectitude - no business transaction would be possible. Even this oblique connection between transaction and morality is, however, questionable, as pernickety legal regulations and threats of stern penalties envelop the conduct of the partners to the extent of making their moral postures all but invisible and above all irrelevant, while making the breach of promise a 'bad business' in a quite tangible, calculable sense.

There are, however, other kinds of reciprocity - non-immediate, non-specific, or neither immediate nor specific. *Gift-giving*, for instance, is

quite often a form of non-immediate reciprocity: reward is neither discussed nor consciously calculated at the moment the offering is made - in the long run, however, one expects gifts to be reciprocated, and in quantities judged to be needed to maintain parity. The readiness of gift-giving is not likely to survive indefinitely unless this expectation comes true. Unlike the case of the business transaction, profit is not the motive of the gift; more often than not it is benevolence that triggers the action. More importantly yet, gift-giving is not an episodic, not a self-contained act. On the contrary, it makes sense - as Claude Levi-Strauss has shown - elaborating on Marcel Mauss's idea of *le don* - when seen as a tool of establishing stable and peaceful relationship between otherwise mutually isolated and/or hostile persons or groups. But similarly to business transactions, 'fairness' and 'equity' are the measures of propriety and success (whatever that may mean) of gift-giving. As in the former case, reciprocity is assumed in gift-giving from the start; accordingly, if a moral consideration is involved at all, it is focused on the recipient, not the giver. It is the recipient whom the gift-giving renders the bearer of a 'moral duty': namely, the duty to reciprocate (this time, indeed, undoubtedly, moral - in the sense of 'merely moral'; that is, not ordained, sustained, or deputized for, by legal rules and legally prescribed sanctions). Whatever moral obligation appears in this context, arises at the far end of the gift-giving act, as its consequence, not the beginning.

And there is as well a kind of reciprocity which is neither immediate nor specific; a *generalized* reciprocity, with no time limit attached; of a kind which we mentioned briefly before, when pondering the idea that it 'pays' to be good to others since others are more likely to be good to those who earned the opinion of being good to others . . . Kindness will be, eventually, repaid by someone, hopefully in excess, and not necessarily by those persons to whom the kindness was done, nor necessarily in the same form or context. Generalized reciprocity is not as easy to monitor for 'equity' as gift-giving. For this reason it may in principle go on for a long time even if returns have not matched the outlay. (In practice, it is rather the other way round: generalized reciprocity evades close monitoring on both sides, and so makes fraud and pretence into 'rational', and always tempting, propositions. This weakness of generalized reciprocity is a

standing invitation to legal interference and the main reason for which ‘mere moral decency’ is seldom relied upon as a solid foundation of any collective endeavour, and certainly not trusted as a building material for a stable structure of society.)

Whatever is the case, however, expectation of reciprocity (even if a delayed one, and of a diffuse kind) is firmly locked on the side of the motives, and as long as this is the case the action it prompts stems from other roots than moral impulse; the circumstance not easy to detect and recognize, since the conduct inspired by considerations of generalized reciprocity may look, for an outside observer, strikingly similar to disinterested generosity.

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