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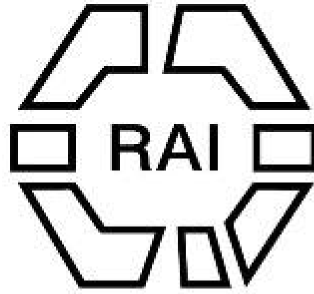

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Source: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Dec., 2000), pp. 617-634
Published by: Wiley on behalf of Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland
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A FREE GIFT MAKES NO FRIENDS

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The giving of alms to Shvetambar Jain renouncers is a specific institutionalized elaboration of the idea of a free gift, an idea which all the major world religions have their own ways of instantiating, and which in north Indian languages is expressed by the word *dan*. This example illustrates the inherently paradoxical nature of the idea of a gift, and why it is a mistake to define the gift as necessarily reciprocal and non-alienated. Like the pure commodity, the pure gift is characterized by the fact that it does not create personal connections and obligations between the parties. This understanding of the gift, which is implicit in Mauss, enables us to resolve the apparent paradox in the ethnography of *dan*, that although it is a free gift it is often harmful to its recipients.

The notion of a 'pure' or 'free' gift has been largely neglected in anthropology. Malinowski employed it in *Argonauts* (1922: 177-80), but in *Crime and custom* (1926: 40-1) he accepted the objections put forward by Mauss (1990: 73-4) and discarded it. Following Mauss, anthropologists have mostly been interested in gift-giving as a way in which enduring social relations are established and maintained. It seemed to Mauss, and has seemed to anthropologists since, that a genuinely free gift – one, as we say, with no strings attached – would play no part in the creation of social relations, for it would create no obligations or connections between persons; and therefore, even if such a thing existed, it would be of no serious interest to anthropology.

Accordingly, little attention has been paid to the free gift. The most sustained discussion has been Jonathan Parry's writings on the gifts in India known as *dan* (1980; 1986; 1989; 1994).[1] Parry has shown that these are unreciprocated, and has related the pure-gift ideology which governs them to the existence of a developed, commercial economy and an ethicized, salvation religion (1986: 466-9).

However, there is a still inadequately explained relation between this and Parry's other major observation about *dan*, which is that it brings misfortune (1994: 130-1). From the north-Indian village of Pahansu, for example, Raheja (1988) describes how *dan* diverts misfortune from donors to recipients. Gujars, described as the dominant caste, specialize in this, and make gifts to hereditary clients including Brahmin priests, Barbers, Sweepers, Washermen, and others. Gifts to wife-taking affines have a similar effect (1988: 153). In Parry's own ethnography from Banaras, misfortune, illness, and even death among funeral priests and their families are attributed to gifts received from pilgrims and mourners. In contrast to the generally benign profits of commerce, *dan*

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brings with it moral and physical corruption, and is likened to a sewer (1989: 69). It is said to carry the donor's sin (*pap*, *dosh*), inauspiciousness (*ashubh*, *amangal*), misfortune (*kasht*), and impurity (*ashuddh*).[2] What kind of a free gift is that?

The apparent paradox, that pure gifts should be so dramatically harmful, can I think be resolved. The first step is to reject the view, whose most influential exponent is C.A. Gregory, of gifts as the logical opposite of commodity exchange, and necessarily personal, reciprocal, and socially binding. Malinowski's original intuition deserved a better defence than he realized: a comprehensive conspectus of exchange transactions requires the category of non-reciprocal free gift.

Because the free gift has, as we shall see, a paradoxical and self-negating character, it may be that convincing institutional enactments of it are at best rare. However, I shall consider a particular case of *dan* which comes remarkably close to being a truly free gift. It enables us to resolve the interpretative puzzle of *dan*, and in so doing show that the fact that the free gift does not create obligations or personal connections is precisely where its social importance lies. The *dan* in question is the giving of alms to Shvetamber Jain renouncers.[3]

Giving and grazing

The following of Shvetambar Jainism in India consists of between 2 and 3 million lay people, and a few thousand itinerant celibate renouncers. The latter rely on alms from lay families for food and for their limited personal possessions: clothes, prayer books, and alms bowls. Justly famed for their asceticism, their daily routine is one of ritualized confessions, prayer, study, and preaching, punctuated by extended fasting and other austerities.

The ultimate goal of the renouncer's life is spiritual purification and salvation (*moksha*). As in other Indic religions, the soul is polluted by *karma*, the effects of previous actions (also called *karma*). Removing *karma* accumulated over many lives requires the heat of austerity (*tap*) to burn it from the soul. It is impossible to achieve purification during a single lifetime, but the injunction to ascetic self-sacrifice is powerful, for lay Jains as well as renouncers.

A guiding principle in the pursuit of purification is non-violence (*ahimsa*), which includes limitations on diet. Since Jain tradition holds that not only animals but also plants and even bacteria have immortal souls, all eating and preparation of food involves violence, and there are elaborate rules for how to keep this to a minimum. Practising Jains are invariably vegetarian, most refrain from a range of vegetables believed to contain many life forms, and many follow more elaborate restrictions on the preparation of food and when it may be consumed. Renouncers follow exacting versions of these restrictions, and so must anyone who wishes to give them alms.

Most days around noon, as Jain families finish preparing lunch, renouncers go out, usually in pairs, to collect alms. They do not ask for food. They make their way along streets where Jain families live – never following the same route on consecutive days – pausing as they go near the doorways of houses and waiting to be invited in. The process is called *gocari*, or grazing. Like a

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grazing cow, renouncers wander unpredictably and turn up unexpectedly. From each household, they take so little that the donors will hardly notice the loss, just as a cow eats only the top of the grass, without pulling up the roots and damaging the plant.[4]

Giving *dan* is the paradigmatic religious good deed (*punya*), and lay families are actively keen to give alms to renouncers. In practice, people often keep a look-out and call renouncers into their homes. Sometimes, they even go to a rest-house in advance, hoping to invite them back home. Strictly, this is against the rules, and even if they do end up going where they are asked, renouncers never explicitly agree, because they are supposed to arrive unexpectedly. This has two aspects. Accepting an invitation would obligate them and compromise the detachment and autonomy that is essential to their pursuit of personal spiritual purification. In addition, the renouncer is not only an object of religious veneration, but also, as a by-definition, uninvited guest (*atithi*), the definitive test in folklore of someone's true generosity.

On entering a house, renouncers are taken to receive their food directly from the family cooking pots. They will only enter the kitchen if it is clean, with no prohibited foods in evidence, and cooking must have finished. Family members place food in the renouncers' alms bowls, generally trying to ensure that they give some of each of the dishes in their meal, and attempting to persuade them to accept as much as possible. The renouncers respond with a litany of refusal: 'No! Less of that. Not so much. Stop!'

The renouncers offer no thanks and make no positive comments on the food. At this point, as a way of emphasizing that enough is enough, they often also call out the benediction, *dharm labh*. This is ambiguous. It means both, 'May you receive the fruit of good conduct', and 'May your adherence to good conduct increase'. They then move on to another house and go through the same procedure there. They are not allowed to accept an entire meal from just one household, or to accept food from the same families day after day.

The image of grazing is important, but one must not be misled. Jain renouncers are not collecting leftovers. This is why they must collect alms before lay families eat. The food they take would have been eaten by the family, who are therefore renouncing (*tyag*) part of their meal. And only food which has been purposefully given, carefully and in the prescribed manner, is acceptable. Unlike Buddhists and some Hindus, Jains consistently deny that alms given to their renouncers are *bhiksh* – that which is given to a beggar. Jain renouncers do not beg, and what they receive is, in theory at least, a gift offered spontaneously.

The food collected is taken back to the rest-house and mixed with that brought by other members of the group into a single mass and eaten out of public view.

No real gifts in anthropology

Probably the most widely cited recent analysis of the gift in anthropology has been Gregory's opposition between gift and commodity exchange (1980; 1982; 1983; 1997). Gregory emphasizes that gifts and commodities create different kinds of debt, and therefore different kinds of relationships between

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transactors. Gifts belong to, and reproduce, 'the social conditions of the reproduction of *people*' within a clan or kinship-based social order; commodities to 'the social conditions of the reproduction of *things*' in a class-based division of labour (1980: 641, original emphases). These two systems of social relations work in logically opposed ways. Gift exchange is 'exchange of inalienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal dependence that establishes a qualitative relationship between the transactors', whereas commodity exchange is 'exchange of alienable objects between people who are in a state of reciprocal independence that establishes a quantitative relationship between the objects exchanged' (1982: 100-1).

Gregory's emphasis on the way transactions can create obligations and social relations is of course valid and interesting. The most common complaint one sees is that his contrast between gift and commodity is overdrawn. The problem seems to me rather that it is incorrectly formulated. It is a mistake to insist that reciprocity and non-alienation are not just observable features of some relations created through gift transactions, but are defining features of gifts as such. According to Gregory only transactions which show these features count as gifts (1997: 65). This analysis obscures rather than illuminates the question of how gift-giving can create the very effects Gregory is interested in. And what in Mauss is an exploration of the paradoxical character of the gift becomes, in Gregory, a flawed and counter-intuitive definition.

We can see that it is counter-intuitive because it rules out good examples of gifts: the more so the more intuitively prototypical they are. The toy I give to my friend's child is ruled out if it is not reciprocated (because I have no children of my own, say). My donation to charity is ruled out if I seek no recognition for myself. The drink I buy you becomes more of a gift (rather than less) if I feel entitled to drink some of it myself! Thus the set of processes and relations identified in this definition is not that denoted by the English word 'gift' or its equivalents in other Indo-European languages, including that of Gregory's own informants in India. It is striking that he makes no use of his analysis, though it is restated and defended at the beginning of *Savage money*, when he turns later in that same book to a description of how Jain families in central India extend their kinship and trading networks (1997: 163-210), even though gifts, at marriage and other times, certainly play a part in this process.

These curious features of Gregory's analysis follow from the fact that he reads Mauss in terms derived from Marx. This is quite explicit. The intention is to enlist the anthropological tradition into an alliance with Marxist political economy against neo-classical economics (1982: x; 1997: 42). But Mauss, as we shall see, is not a suitable recruit for this particular draft. Marx's notion of surplus value is logically tied to his essentially metaphysical (and also Romantic) view that 'really' value is derived exclusively from labour, which the worker is assumed 'naturally' to own. The fact that labour is commodified, so that the worker is alienated from his labour, is what makes possible the alienation of the product in commodity exchange. When Gregory claims that the gift is not alienated he is saying that just those ownership rights which are violated in commodity exchange are preserved and reinforced in the gift.

Mauss is invoked in support of this notion of inalienability, and indeed Mauss does speak of enduring connections between givers and things given.

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But Mauss's talk of the intermingling of (previously separate) souls and persons with things (e.g. 1990: 20) is a quite different line of thought – one that ought to lead us to think, if of anything in Marx, of fetishism. The connections Mauss is talking of are not ultimately derived from labour value, and he does not conceptualize them as ownership rights. The conceptual yoking of the gift to Marx's analysis of the commodity presents a clear choice. Either there is alienation of ownership, in which case, as Gregory rightly observes, the recipient of a gift would be expropriating the donor, and this (as well as being implausible) would mean that the supposed specificity of capitalist exploitation would evaporate; or else there is no alienation in the gift. It is the latter possibility that Gregory insists upon, even though it implies that in giving a gift you are not really giving anything away.

The effect is that Gregory's definition attempts to tidy away the basic paradox at the heart of the idea of a gift. I shall next try to describe what that paradox is and how the Jain institution of *dan* so nearly overcomes it, before showing how a perception of this paradox lies at the heart of Mauss's essay, and helps explain why and when we find harmful free gifts in India.

The impossible idea of a gift

What is the basic, irreducible idea of a gift? One party makes over something of theirs to another. There is no 'price', and there is no recompense. It is given, and that is that.

This is such a simple idea that anyone might have it, and there is no reason to suppose that there has ever been a society in which no one has ever sought to enact it. But if we reflect on what would need to be the case for a pure and incontestable example to occur, then it emerges as deeply paradoxical. This theme is explored in an illuminating way by Derrida (1992); and, without any broader philosophical or ontological commitments, I shall draw here on what he says (see also the excellent discussion in Jenkins 1998).

Derrida asks: what are the conditions implicit in the idea of a free gift? He suggests four conditions. (1) First, there can be no reciprocity. It must not be in return for something else, either past or anticipated. A return would enter into or establish an 'economic' cycle – calculation, interest, measurement, and so on – and make it part of an interested exchange. (2) To prevent this, therefore, the recipient must not recognize the gift as a gift, or him- or herself as recipient of one, which would lead to a sense of debt or obligation. (3) Similarly, the donor must not recognize the gift, since to do so is to praise and gratify oneself, to 'give back to himself symbolically the value of what he thinks he has given' (1992: 14). (4) Lastly, and as a result of the foregoing, the thing cannot exist as a gift as such. As soon as it appears 'as gift', it becomes part of a cycle and ceases to be a gift. So, Derrida suggests, we cannot even speak of a gift without making it disappear. 'The simple identification of the passage of a gift as such, that is, of an identifiable thing among some identifiable "ones", would be nothing other than the destruction of the gift' (1992: 14). In sum then: 'For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift' (1992: 16).

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This basic perception of paradox is a useful insight: an indubitable gift, as an actual event in the world, is difficult to envisage. I do not wish to follow Derrida very far, however, down his never-ending (and probably historically and culturally specific) regress through ever more acute hermeneutic suspicion. The basic paradox, implicit in the very idea of a gift and therefore present wherever it occurs, is enough for social arrangements to have to grapple with.

Here and elsewhere (e.g. 1978: 251-77), Derrida uses the term 'economy' in a very broad sense. It refers not just to the circulation of goods and services, but also beyond that to the circulation of time, or rather to the way in which, through the medium of time, events and actions are related causally to each other. This economy is the world of common-sense and everyday experience, but within it, Derrida concludes, a gift is impossible. The routine transitivity of actions in time, according to which my giving to you implies that you receive from me, would have to be overcome. There could only be a gift, that is to say, on condition that the flow of time were suspended.

A gift that is given, but not received

In the light of Derrida's analysis, we can see the rules governing the Jain alms-giving as an institutionalized attempt to overcome the problems he identifies. Jain renouncers must obtain the food they need to sustain life without breaching the insulation from the economy that is the precondition and point of their spiritual enterprise. The result does not exactly match Derrida's free gift – if he is right, of course, then it never could – but perhaps it comes as close as we can fairly expect. Let us then retrace Derrida's main points, in reverse order, to see how the Jain alms-giving holds back the 'inevitable' transition from gift to economic exchange.

(4) Householders make a gift of food, and renouncers receive and consume it, but both linguistically, and in terms of how it is treated, everything is done to undermine the idea that 'there is a something' that is given by the donor and received by the recipient.

The word 'food' (*khana*), is never used for what renouncers eat. It is called '*gocari*', after the process of collecting it. Householders even avoid using the verb 'to give' (*dena*). There is no question that giving alms is a *dan*, but it is disrespectful to use the word in this context, as it seems to equate renouncers with mere recipients of charity. A common indirection is to speak of 'placing' something in the alms bowl. More formally, the act is referred to as '*baharana*'. This word seems to be used only by Jains, and its etymology is unclear, but the likeliest derivation is from the causative form of a verb meaning 'to fill'. That renouncers are given something to eat ought to remain unspoken.

Not only language separates what is given from what is received. When renouncers go from house to house, the food collected is added to the same bowls. It is brought back to the rest-house and handed over to the most senior renouncer, who then combines it with that collected by others from the

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group. All this *gocari* is mixed together in one mass. Partly this is done as an austerity, because renouncers should not savour the separate tastes of different dishes; but also, and inseparable from this, it effectively subsumes each family's individual offering.

The family making the gift strives to ensure that what they give is singularly theirs. They press the renouncers to accept all the dishes in the family meal; and on occasions when they try to invite renouncers home, they often prepare some time-consuming dish, which one might normally buy from the market. But this personal substance, closely identified with the donors, is not what the renouncers receive and consume, which is instead an anonymous and undifferentiated substance. Derrida comments that we cannot speak of a gift without making it disappear. Here, the gift as object is made to disappear once it has been given, so that there is no longer the same 'it' of which to speak.

(3) Derrida suggests that a gift which the donor recognizes as such ceases to be a gift. We should distinguish two possible sources of this recognition: identification of the other as the beneficiary of one's largesse on the one hand, and of oneself as donor on the other. While the Jain practice does effectively prevent the former, it actually, and as a result, emphasizes the latter.

Even if donors were allowed to witness the food being eaten, they could not see their gift being enjoyed, for it is no longer there as such. Any gratification donors feel as a result of making their gift, and there can be no doubt that they do, cannot derive from this.

This alms-giving, like other instances of *dan* (Biardeau 1976; Parry 1980; 1986; Strenski 1983), is ideologically identified with sacrifice; but the size of the sacrifice any donor can make is restricted, in theory to the point where it becomes indiscernible. No experience of hardship for the donors, which might give rise to a sense of personal indebtedness and obligation, should result.

(2) As for the recipients, the food they eat cannot appear to them as the gift of someone in particular, because different donors' contributions are merged. What they receive is depersonalized, being something they have gathered from among 'the laity'. They need not then, in Derrida's terms, recognize the gift as gift.

They know that their food was not made especially for them. This is why they must leave most of each dish to be consumed by the family, and why they are not allowed to take food from a kitchen where cooking is still going on. If food were subsequently cooked to replace what they had taken, then it, and the sin attaching to it, would effectively be theirs. The same would be true if they were ever to express a liking for any particular kind of food, and someone later made that dish with the intention of giving it to them. It would then be a gift 'for them', and in accepting it they would be entering into the economy of temporal and causal connections. They would be the cause of *karma*-causing actions in the world, and therefore guilty of sin.

(1) Therefore – to bring us back to Derrida's starting-point – there is no reciprocity. Renouncers are specifically forbidden to express pleasure at the food offered, to offer any thanks, or even to be diverted into general conversation; especially where, as is sometimes the case, they know the lay family

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quite well. The whole procedure is got through as quickly as possible, and in a generally abrupt and businesslike manner. A renouncer may not give, and a donor family may not receive, anything in return for the food donated; not even, as we have seen, praise or blame for its quality.

However, although donors receive nothing back from the renouncers, or indeed from anyone else on their behalf, it is generally held that they will benefit from being the giver of the gift. This is where the alms-giving differs from Derrida's impossible pure gift. The recipient is spared the obligations that arise from receiving, but the givers have still given. Making a *dan* is meritorious, an act of *punya* or good *karma*. As such, it is expected, by an entirely impersonal process over which no one has any influence, to bring its own reward; although one cannot know when or in what manner the resulting good fortune will come. It may be in a future life, and indeed in Jain religious stories, this is typically the case (Balbir 1982). Everyone agrees that this only happens if the *dan* is unreciprocated, because otherwise it would not really be *dan* at all, but part of the give-and-take of worldly life.

There is not a complete escape from paradox, however, because Jain teachers, like their Hindu counterparts (Parry 1986: 462; 1994: 128), insist that if even an unreciprocated gift is motivated by the desire for merit, then none will result. A good gift is given 'without desire'. It is unpremeditated and prompted by either reverence (*bhakti*) or compassion (*daya*) for the recipient. In line with Derrida's reasoning, even self-congratulation is a return and invalidates the gift. This seems to be the one aspect of the impossibility of the gift which the rules and formal arrangements of the Jain alms-giving cannot get around. It is left as a matter between the donors and their own desires and intentions.

In any case, any good *karma* the donor receives does not come from the recipient. The imagery (as in Buddhism) is that renouncers are a 'field of merit', fertile soil where a good action will bring forth a good reward (Williams 1963: 149–66). The more virtuous the renouncer, the greater the merit in making a gift to him or her. But renouncers do not give the merit; it is the natural result of the donor's good action. The biblical image fits so well that Jain teachers often use it: as you sow, so shall you reap.

It follows therefore that the '*dharm labh*' benediction is not, as it might appear, itself a return for the gift of food. As mentioned above, it is ambiguous, and can be interpreted either as the wish that donors will enjoy the fruits of their good action; or as an injunction to further and greater religious observance. On the second reading, although rather terse and formulaic, it could be regarded as a gift, but the sense in which this might be so needs careful specification.

Exchange out of time

As is the case in Hinduism and Buddhism, over the centuries Jain teachers have shown great interest in gifts. They have laid down rules about how they should be given and received,[5] and developed numerous classifications of types of gift (Williams 1963: 149-66). The most prominent today is the following:

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1	*abhay dan*	a gift of fearlessness
2	*supatra dan*	a gift to a worthy recipient
3	*anukampa dan*	a gift given out of compassion
4	*ucit dan*	a gift given out of duty
5	*kirti dan*	a gift given to earn fame

These gifts are listed in descending order of virtue. The last three are self-explanatory, and include any *dan* given for the specified motives. The last (*kirti dan*), because it is motivated by vanity, is not a *dan* at all in reality, but a sin.

The first two categories are less transparent. *Abhay dan* is the teaching of Jain religion, and therefore basically preaching by renouncers. It delivers one from fear, especially fear of one's own death. Lay Jains, if they actually save someone's life, perform a pale reflection of this *abhay dan* (its merely 'material' form), but in its essential form it is the preserve of renouncers. *Supatra dan* is gifts to Jain renouncers, including offerings before statues in Jain temples. They are the highest form of *dan* a lay person can make, to the only really worthy recipients.

Abhay dan and *supatra dan* thus have in common the fact that they are specifically concerned with Jain soteriology. They are the two forms of gift which make Jainism possible and are therefore on a higher ethical level than the ordinary give-and-take of worldly life. They belong to a different ethical realm from the three lower kinds of gift, because their *raison d'être* is the pursuit of escape from *samsar* – the cycle of death and rebirth – and so the achievement of permanent cessation of embodied temporal existence. If, as Derrida suggests, the condition for a pure gift is that the flow of time be suspended, then we may note that this is exactly the condition of transcendence and salvation to which *abhay dan* and *supatra dan* are oriented.

Now even though *abhay dan* is only metaphorically a gift at all (as in both its material and essential forms nothing is actually given), it is possible to imagine it and *supatra dan* as making up a system of exchange. In the case of Theravada Buddhism, Strenski has argued that gifts given by lay Buddhists to renouncers, and the mostly ritual services which are provided vice versa, constitute a system of generalized exchange (1983). He notes that this system rests on the fact that *dan* is an unreciprocated gift, ideologically close to sacrifice, and on a firm rejection of reciprocity between particular lay Buddhists and particular monks.[6] Departing somewhat from Lévi-Strauss himself, Strenski argues that although what it binds together is conceptualized as consisting of just two entities (the laity and the *sangha*), the system can be regarded as generalized exchange because it is brought about by a great multiplicity of unreciprocated gifts between multifarious lay families and monks. No donor binds the recipient of the gift with an obligation to return. Each, in giving, must take the speculative risk on which generalized exchange depends (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 265), that a return will come from elsewhere.

The same applies in the Jain case, where what the laity gives to the renouncers can be counterposed to the teaching and example given by the latter. The imaginative abstraction which enables one to see things this way, from the time of lived experience to the long run of what Lévi-Strauss calls structural or 'reversible' time, is one that Jains themselves also make. If the participants are imagined not as particular lay families and particular renouncers,

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but as the abstract orders of laity and renouncers, then 'Jain society' consists of these entities and the relation between them that is produced and sustained by a patterned exchange of gifts.[7]

So even though 'Jain society' rests on a system of exchange, it is a system made up, in real lived time, of unreciprocated gifts; and the collective entities which make it up are different in kind from the parties involved in the gifts. No one is motivated to make a gift of food in return for the teaching renouncers give or the example they represent. Householders seek to maximize their gift out of devotion, and the desire to perform a good *karma*, and so gain merit. For renouncers, the priority is to avoid anything that compromises their autonomy. These apparently conflicting purposes are mutually reinforcing (Laidlaw 1995: 314-23). The renouncer's surly indifference encourages the importunate generosity of the donor. The latter's persistence enables the renouncer to exercise exemplary restraint, and yet still emerge from the encounter with enough to eat. Thus in so far as there is calculation and even agonistic competition in how both parties behave, this is not governed by considerations of reciprocity. There is no attempt to calculate equivalence, or to balance or outdo the other, and no sense in which what is given is conditional on a return.

In all these respects, it is therefore reasonable to say that *supatra dan* is a free gift. It is a specific institutionalized cultural elaboration of that simple but inherently paradoxical idea: an attempt to give it a real existence in practice.[8] It should not only be a voluntary expression of positive sentiments, an unreciprocated sacrifice of something closely identified with the giver; it should also create no debt or obligation, indeed no social relation at all between giver and recipient.

Why should anyone go to all this trouble not to create social relations? In the Jain case the *raison d'être* lies, as Parry anticipates, in a radically soteriological religion. Reciprocal relations between lay Jains and renouncers, unlike the out-of-time exchange of *abhay dan* and *supatra dan*, would preclude the transcendence of temporal causal relations (*samsar* or Derrida's 'economy') and the achievement of unending spiritual perfection (*moksha*).

The idea of a gift in The gift

What is the relation between the free gift and what we may call the Maussian gift, one that creates social relations?

Mauss's *The gift* is about many things, but on the face of it gifts as such are not among them. He goes out of his way to say that some things which Malinowski thought to be so are not in fact free gifts, and explicit discussion of anything that might be is virtually non-existent (Testart 1997: 97; see also Derrida 1992: 24). This is not because the idea of a gift is peripheral to Mauss's essay; on the contrary, it is because implicit invocation of it is central to the construction of the argument.

Mauss traces the genealogy of the most important concepts in commercial exchange (1990: 4). He assembles, in Parry's words (1986: 457), an 'archaeology of contractual obligation'. The gifts that concern Mauss are the forerunners of today's market transactions, they are the way 'the market' operated

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before its more characteristic instruments (such as money, formal contracts, and 'self interest') had developed. This is a story which embraces all of human history, for 'the market is a human phenomenon that, in our view, is not foreign to any known society' (1990: 4). The essay tells a story of how contractual obligation grew out of the binding of the recipient to the giver which takes place by means of the gift, and of how the qualities of gifts which made that possible have been progressively (but not entirely) stripped away and replaced during the course of social evolution.

The evolutionary argument in Mauss has been well brought out by Parry (1986). The story is one of simplification, as the modern forms of gift and commodity are progressively disaggregated. The free gift is an idea which has developed and been more clearly articulated as the commodity economy has developed. The articulation has been pioneered (this is a point made more by Parry than by Mauss in *The gift* although it is implicit in some of his other writings) by the world religions. But this distinction between the free gift and the commodity is not only a historical product, which Mauss's essay describes, it is also a logical tool which Mauss uses in making his argument. That argument proceeds by a sort of rhetorical double movement, one that is repeatedly applied to all of the major examples he uses along the way.

Mauss tells us on the one hand that the transactions he describes 'take the form' of gifts. He never elaborates exactly what this implies, except for the repeated use of expressions such as 'free', 'disinterested', and 'generous'. So the point is that although these transactions are serious politics and serious economics – he insists again and again on their size and importance – they are 'given as' free gifts. The complementary move is where Mauss says that, their gift-like quality notwithstanding, they are always also obligatory (1990: e.g. 33, 65, 68, 73).

So these transactions both are and are not free gifts. Mauss can only really make the argument because the idea of what a real free gift would be is left unexamined. The reader's understanding of it is tacitly invoked. Because the invocation is implicit, and because the idea of the gift is, as Derrida has shown us, anyway unstable and paradoxical, it can be made to work in two quite contrary ways at once.

Our idea that a real gift is free, beneficent, and unconstrained supplies the moral content, not reducible to utilitarian self-interest, which is required for Mauss's Durkheimian account of sociality – the non-contractual moral content that makes contract possible. Mauss finds this ethnographically expressed in the widespread idea that a part of the giver's soul or self is embodied in the given thing: that 'by giving one is giving *oneself*' (1990: 46; original emphasis). He explicates this idea with reference first to the Maori notion of the *hau*, and then in the other cases he examines (1990: 43-4, 46, 58-9, 62). And the reader irresistibly recognizes his or her own belief that a real gift is personal; that, as Emerson puts it in an essay cited (though for another reason) by Mauss, 'The only gift is a portion of thyself' (1995: 257). Thus Mauss's explanation for how gifts can have the capacity to create the moral basis of sociality mobilizes our everyday understanding of what a pure gift would be.

On the other hand, he also mobilizes our knowledge of the less elevated calculation – the 'polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit' (1990: 3) – which our time-bound gift-giving necessarily involves. Among us, as much as in his

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'archaic' examples, gifts and invitations are required by custom, and must be returned with the same or more (1990: 65-6); and we, too, make generous gifts in order to lord it over others (1990: 75). Thus Mauss invites us to see that these things, which we have thought of as improprieties or offences against 'the spirit of the gift', are in fact in perfect accord with it. He commends the gift-exchange systems described in the body of his essay to the attention of a modern readership because of their capacity to generate peace and social cohesion, as well as prosperity (1990: 25, 32-3, 34, 82-3). They are an invitation to us to turn back the clock, and pull back from what he rather snobbishly describes as the emerging 'tradesman morality' (1990: 65). As Sahlins says, 'If friends make gifts, gifts make friends' (1972: 186). Mauss's explanation of how they do this depends equally on the calculation and competition we know to be at work in competitive exchange, and on the freedom and generosity that are implied by the idea of a free gift. Gifts evoke obligations and create reciprocity, but they can do this because they might not: what creates the obligation is the gesture or moment which alienates the given thing and asks for no reciprocation.

Derrida remarks: 'The truth of the gift ... suffices to annul the gift' (1992: 27). This self-annulment is recapitulated in Mauss's essay. Although he could only develop his analysis of exchange systems by means of the concept of the gift, by the end (1990: 72-3) he is wondering whether the essay has really been about gifts at all. He remarks that, because the objects are not really given freely and givers are not really disinterested, the words 'present' and 'gift' do not properly apply to them.

Mauss's essay therefore works by playing on the paradoxical and self-negating character of the gift. His explanation of reciprocity depends on invoking features of both the free gift and its negation, which is frankly interested exchange. To take Mauss's careful exploitation of the paradox of the gift, and to replace it, as Gregory does, with a definition of the gift as necessarily reciprocal, is to deprive us of Mauss's central insight. For Mauss, friend-making gift exchange is not opposed to, but is an embryonic form of, commodity exchange, and its principles are still to be found, though attenuated, in modern commerce. It is located on the logical and phenomenological trajectory between pure gift and commodity, which are therefore shown to be genetically related and mutually constitutive. The self-negating free gift is so to speak present, even if only for a moment, in the transactions which make up systems of reciprocal gift exchange. Without the free gift, we only have part of the picture.

Pure poison?

If we now turn back to the Indian practices which seek to instantiate the free and unreciprocated gift, how are we to account for the dangers associated with it? In Parry's most comprehensive discussion (1994: 119-48), he concludes that the perils of *dan* are a cultural idiom in which norms of reciprocity and interdependence are expressed. Priests in Banaras suffer because they receive but do not give *dan*, so contravening the norm of reciprocity (1989: 77; 1994: 134).

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They should not reciprocate directly, but they should be givers of *dan* in their turn. Then the poison they receive would also be passed on harmlessly in an open-ended cycle of Lévi-Straussian generalized exchange which keeps the poison in motion. But since the Banaras priests depend on gifts for their subsistence, they are only ever recipients. Flow and circulation stop. As Parry puts it, the sewer becomes a cesspit.

Parry considers another possible solution to their predicament. They subscribe to the widespread idea that ideally a Brahmin is a this-worldly representative of the renouncer (1994: 123; see also Fuller 1984: 49-71; Heesterman 1964). If, like an ideal Brahmin, they performed their rituals correctly and practised austerities, they could consume the impurities they receive by burning them away through asceticism. But they do not know the rituals well enough or practise serious asceticism, and so they suffer.

Comparison with the Jain case suggests that neither of these points quite gets to the heart of the matter. The problem of being dependent on *dan*, and therefore not being able to give it oneself, can be resolved or at any rate glossed over with just a little semiotic ingenuity. Jain renouncers are daily dependent on alms but are also givers of *dan*, albeit in a non-material currency. The 'gift of fearlessness' costs them nothing in material terms. Some version of this idea must be available to the Banaras priests. The fact that they do not adopt it suggests that it would not solve the problem, and indeed it does not do so for Jain renouncers. Neither does the latter's asceticism. As we have seen, Jain renouncers still have to take elaborate precautions in the way they accept *dan*, or they too would be afflicted by their donors' misdeeds. The danger is present, but the rules help them to avert it.

In Pahansu, recipients of *dan* are also said to digest it by means of heat. Brahmins perform austerities, mostly by reciting *mantras*. Other castes, who do not, are said to generate heat through 'the simple activities of householdership (*grihasthi*): grinding, husking, churning, and sexual intercourse, and so forth' (Raheja 1988: 91). In other words, no one has to do anything they would not be doing anyway, which hardly seems like evidence of a very afflicting poison. Thus not being able to dispose of poison received with gifts is not an insuperable problem. Moreover, in Raheja's ethnography there is no indication of anyone allegedly suffering anything, other than that very dominance of the Gujars of which these transactions are the symbolic performance. This contrasts with the Banaras priests, whose gifts keep them in 'a perpetual state of moral crisis' (Parry 1994: 123). Why is the *dan* given to priests and renouncers so much more dangerous in the first place? How are these dangers averted by the renouncers and not by the priests?

It should be emphasized that these possibilities of moral and biological miscegenation are not limited to *dan*. The theme of social contact and interdependence as morally entangling is extraordinarily prominent in South Asian social life. The whole elaborate ideology of caste is predicated on the idea that this can occur through physical contact, propinquity, and transactions not restricted to *dan* (Dumont 1980; Marriott 1968; 1976). Cooked food (Appadurai 1981) and cloth (Bayly 1986) are powerful media for the flow of bio-moral qualities between persons, even when they are bought and sold, or given as non-*dan* gifts. Detached parts of the body, such as hair and nails, can be conduits of spiritual and personal qualities, as can sexual fluids. Moreover,

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such bio-moral contact is not always poisonous. Successful marriage depends on a propitious mixing of bio-moral substance (Daniel 1984). Blessings from deities and holy men are given in similar ways (Babb 1987). Substance being pooled, shared, or mixed, with consequent changes in the physical and spiritual condition of those involved, is therefore common in other kinds of transaction and interaction. The 'poison in the gift' is not some unique or mysterious substance found only in gifts, it is the dangers attendant on social interaction in general: demeaning or demanding connections, debts, and obligations to do things for other people's benefit. So if there is anything distinctive about *dan*, it is not that it carries poison.

For most people, the dangers of social interdependence are bound to be double-edged. Treat your affines with caution, even suspicion; but you do need and want to have affines. Try to avoid importunate demands from your acquaintances; but make your own on them. Receiving *dan* and incurring obligations is only an unambiguously bad thing for those who aim at non-reciprocity, which means renouncers, and all those, like many Brahmins and especially Brahmin priests, whose social status depends on their claim to be like renouncers.

It is therefore unsurprising that these are precisely the dangers which the rules governing the Jain *supatra dan* all work to prevent. The donor and the renouncer must not become morally entangled and responsible for each other's actions. In so far as this *dan* succeeds in being a free gift, this is indeed prevented, because no social obligations are created by the transaction. Food is given (though it is something else that is received) without anything else changing: no obligation, reciprocation, mutuality, or sociality comes into being. Indeed, even if they know each other, the parties behave as strangers in the transaction.

This social distancing is an important aspect of *dan* which derives from its character as a free gift. Raheja notes that people in Pahansu say that *dan* is only given to those who are 'other'; but she notes also that these same recipients are described as 'one's own people' when they are recipients not of *dan* but of reciprocal gifts (1988: 212; 1995). I suggest that the recipient being 'other' is not so much a precondition as a result of *dan*, which counteracts the mutuality established by Maussian gifts. In the case of *supatra dan* this is crucial, because everyday mutuality would be fatal to the renouncer's project of detachment and purification.

So priests in Banaras suffer not because they contravene the (putatively universal) norm of reciprocity, but because they contravene the norm of non-reciprocity: the ideal which governs the free gift they are supposed to be receiving; and one to which, as aspirant quasi-renouncers, they are supposed to subscribe.

They are bad recipients (*kupatra*) of *dan*. They do not fulfil the requirement (Parry 1994: 122) of being unwilling to receive it. And in general they behave in such a way that, whatever their donors do, they turn a free gift into an interested exchange. Parry gives a vivid description of the inventive, persistent, and at times by turns deceitful and vituperative haggling which Banaras priests employ in arguing up the *dan* they are offered (1994: 139-48). They operate a sophisticated cartel system to prevent competition between them

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from exerting downward pressure on the price of their services (1994: 75-90). No wonder there is widespread scepticism, which they themselves share, about the value-for-money of what they provide.

The first part of an answer to the question of 'whence the poison in the gift?' is therefore that it is not poisonous for everyone or in all situations. This is clear in the classical texts which, where they mention such dangers, do so in the context of *dan* being performed incorrectly. What the Jain case makes clear, then, is that *dan* is not the problem – the cause of a unique kind of peril – but on the contrary it is a solution, though admittedly a highly elusive one. It is a transaction which can, if performed correctly, be free of a peril which is otherwise highly prevalent in this social and cultural environment. In a world in which the mixing of persons and things, which Mauss described as happening in gift exchange and which Gregory misdescribes as 'inalienability', actually happens very readily all the time, the point of a free gift is to prevent it.

Dan should be an alienated and non-reciprocal free gift. In practice, it can at best approach to this ideal, because the ideal itself is impossible (which is why the texts are full of warnings). Sometimes this does not matter all that much. However, the matter is serious for people, paradigmatically renouncers but also those who model themselves on renouncers, who aspire not to dominance but to detachment and social separation (see Fuller 1988; Parry 1994: 264-71). For Jain renouncers this concern is definitional of their whole way of life. In *gocari*, they can more-or-less entirely overcome the impossibility of a free gift, and they receive without incurring any debts.

For Banaras priests there seems to be a contradiction. Although many of these priests are known as Mahabrahmins ('great Brahmins'), in fact most people deny they are Brahmins at all. Their contact with death means they are regarded as hardly different from untouchables. Like the Gujar 'dominant caste' of Pahansu, they claim a high status that is denied by many others and this probably explains, in both cases, why *dan* is such a salient concern. The Banaras priests subscribe to the theory that their status derives from being quasi-renouncers, and their assertion of this status is as vehement as their detractors' denials are contemptuous; but the plain fact is they are not actually renouncers. And even as priests go, they do badly in conforming to the ideal. They need to maintain their homes and families, and renunciatory detachment is a luxury they can ill afford. At any event, and ultimately, if they are poisoned by a gift, this is because they have asked for it.

Conclusion

The point that a free gift has no power to bind was recognized, according to Pollock and Maitland (1898: 213), from the earliest period in English law. No court would uphold gratuitous gifts or enforce gratuitous promises. From this arose the custom that the giver of a gift should receive in return some valueless trifle, just enough to make an exchange and therefore a legally valid transaction. *Dan* takes the opposite course: by remaining a resolutely free gift, it remains free of obligation.

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While the concept of a 'pure gift' has often been dismissed as naïve and unsociological, that of a 'pure commodity' has been shown more latitude. Carrier, in a general discussion of commodity exchange, makes the point that commodities are fungible. He then notes that this is not always equally so. Works of design, art, and craft are not interchangeable one for another, and it matters by whom they were made; yet they are exchanged as commodities. However, he continues, 'these qualifications do not contradict the point that commodities are impersonal. Instead they show that not everything that we buy and sell is a pure commodity' (Carrier 1995: 29). Similarly, not all that we give and receive is a pure gift. I have suggested that almost nothing ever could be. But in so far as the Jain case is a guide, it suggests that impersonality, if it is a feature of the commodity (which seems reasonable enough), is equally a feature of the free gift; rather than it being, as incautious reading of Mauss has led us to expect, a dimension in which these two kinds of transaction are opposed. No doubt this is why religious charity and philanthropy in all the great religions have repeatedly rediscovered the supreme value of the anonymous donation, only to find that time and again donors have been more attracted to the benefits of the socially entangling Maussian gift, which does make friends.

NOTES

This paper began as a talk given to the Anthropological Theory seminar at the London School of Economics in January 1999. I am grateful to Fenella Cannell for her invitation to the seminar, and to the participants for stimulating questions and observations. I am grateful to those who read and commented on subsequent drafts of the paper: Alan Babb, Marcus Banks, Susan Bayly, Barbara Bodenhorn, John Cort, Paul Dundas, Chris Fuller, Caroline Humphrey, Jonathan Mair, Jonathan Parry, Marilyn Strathern, and Helen Ward. I am grateful also for comments from the Editor and readers of the *JRAI*.

[1] Others who have discussed the free gift include Sahlins (1972: 185-276) and Carrier (1995: 145-67). Others who have observed that *dan* is unreciprocated and ideologically a free gift include Tambiah (1970: 213), Trautmann (1981: 278-93), and Strenski (1983).

[2] See also Heesterman (1964), Shulman (1985), and Trautmann (1981). Raheja would exclude impurity from this list, but for counter-arguments see Parry (1991).

[3] To be more precise, the example is that of the Shvetambar Murtipujak Khartar Gacch Jains, as I have observed it, mostly in the city of Jaipur, since 1983.

[4] Another image used by the Jains (Lalwani 1973: 3; Laidlaw 1995: 305) and also by Hindus (Parry 1980; 1994: 122) is of the bee which gathers pollen from the flower without damaging the plant.

[5] Contemporary practice is most influenced by the *Dashavaikalika sutra*, which is studied by all Shvetambar renouncers. See Lalwani (1973).

[6] Carrithers (1984) has pointed out that in practice, because Buddhist monks have often lived sedentary lives among their lay followers, relations of reciprocity have tended to develop, and this has been one of the motivations for 'reformist' movements of forest-dwelling monks (Carrithers 1983; Tambiah 1984). While Jain history has also seen schismatic movements and reforms along similar lines, the itinerancy of Jain renouncers has meant that the Jain case has more consistently resembled Strenski's model.

[7] Jains would deny any implication that the two gifts might be of equal value. It is also relevant that renouncers are not obliged to offer the opportunity of giving them gifts, but on the contrary to fast as much as possible and eat rarely.

[8] Of course it is not the only possible way this might be done, and it may be contrasted, for example, with the paradigm of the 'perfect present' which Carrier (1995: 145-67) finds expressed in contemporary Euro-America.

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Les dons libres, sans bons comptes, ne font pas les bons amis

Resumé

L'offrande d'aumônes aux moines Jaïns renonçants de Shvetambar est une élaboration institutionalisée spécifique de l'idée de don libre, une idée que toutes les principales religions mondiales ont leur propres façons d'instaurer et qui est exprimée par le mot *dan* dans les langues du nord de l'Inde. Cet exemple illustre le caractère paradoxe inhérent à l'idée de don et les raisons pour lesquelles il est erroné de définir le don comme nécessairement réciproque et sans aliénation. Tout comme la notion de commodité pure, la notion de don pur est caractérisée par l'absence de création de connections et d'obligations de nature personnelle entre les parties. Une telle compréhension du don, qui est implicite chez Mauss, nous permet de résoudre le paradoxe apparent dans l'ethnographie du *dan* qui, tout en étant un don libre, est souvent nocif pour ses récipients.

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