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ON THE NORM OF RECIPROCITY

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ON THE NORM OF RECIPROCITY¹

1. Introduction

It is almost inevitable that a reflection that proposes to rethink the norm of reciprocity would recall a well-known 1960 text by the American sociologist Alvin Gouldner, titled "The Norm of Reciprocity."² One might wonder whether the purpose of my presentation has to do with the norm itself or with Gouldner's article. The answer is: probably both—about the former, through the latter. In order to clarify the stakes of the project, it may be interesting to note from the outset one of the main conclusions reached by Gouldner: "I suggest that a norm of reciprocity, in its universal form, makes two interrelated, minimal demands: (1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them."³ We can assume that in writing those words Gouldner was aware that his statement was an exact formulation of the ancient Golden Rule (in its positive and negative forms). That rule is observed in many traditions, and written statements of it date back long before the common era: over 1000 years for Zoroastrism, 600 years for Taoism, 500 years for the Babylonian Talmud and for Buddhism. Gouldner does not mention this, and he does not appear to remember that both of his statements are found in the Gospels according to Luke and to Matthew, along with the following gloss: "For this is the law and the prophets."⁴ In other words, it is the entire morale and revelation. – This deserved to be mentioned, at least in passing, especially on the part of an author who opens his writing with a quote by Cicero. There is more. Just before that remarkable conclusion, Gouldner presents another one just as important: the norm of reciprocity is undoubtedly universal--as universal as the prohibition of incest, he adds.⁵ This is another source of surprise: at the beginning of his article, Gouldner rightly mentions Lévi-Strauss among the leading theoreticians of reciprocity; and

¹ Original French version in M. Maesschalck Ed., *Ethique et gouvernance. Les enjeux actuels d'une philosophie des normes*, Olms, Hildesheim, New York, 2009 ; pp. 113-128.- Do not quote without permission

² Alvin W. Gouldner, "The Norm of reciprocity," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 25, 1960, n° 2, p. 161-78.

³ A. Gouldner, Id., p. 171.

⁴ Matthew 7:12.

⁵ A. Gouldner, Id., p. 171.

yet, when Gouldner compares the universal character of this norm to that of the prohibition of incest, he fails to realize that for Lévi-Strauss the two problems are one, or are at least tightly connected. Lévi-Strauss' innovative hypothesis amounts to interpreting the prohibition of incest not as a moral or biological prohibition but as a *universal and positive rule of reciprocity* that is necessary to understand the exogamic phenomenon in human societies, which is just as universal. The daughter or the sister that the group denies itself thus becomes available as a wife for other groups which follow the same rule. It is immediately clear that the enigma has shifted; it lies no longer in the prohibition of incest but in the very requirement of reciprocity that is the foundation of the prohibition. How can we account for that requirement? Lévi-Strauss views it as a principle, as stated in the very title of the chapter in which he discusses the problem.⁶ But what does reciprocity mean? Lévi-Strauss attempts to explain it through a simple example that he has witnessed. He observed that in the South of France, in certain inexpensive restaurants with a single menu, where very diverse kinds of customers have lunch, a small flask of wine, which comes with the meal, is placed in front of each plate. Customers often find themselves facing or sitting next to someone they have never met. Each customer pours into his neighbor's glass the content of his own flask; the neighbor does the same, and they start up a conversation. What has happened? Almost nothing—and at the same time everything. Almost nothing, since the exchange adds no value: it is obviously a mere permutation of identical goods; and yet almost everything, since through this gesture each participant lets the other know that he wishes to recognize him, to accept and honor his presence. Each of them tells the other: you do exist for me and I express this fact; I respect you. Here lies the core of the problem, at the same time social—as the genesis of the human being's relationship to the other—, ethical—as the immediate requirement to respect the other in his presence—, and finally as the inter-relational genesis of the social bond in the phenomenon of convention, i.e. the invention of an implicit alliance that commits persons or groups to live together, even though their *otherness*—as autonomous beings—is irreducible. This emergence of convention as alliance between separate beings is at the core of the political relationship. I

⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston, Beacon Pr., 1969, (orig. 1947), Chap. V, "The Principle of Reciprocity," p.52-68.

consider it as the pragmatic genesis of the *politeia*. We will see that the question of otherness lies at the core of the problem.

Through its implications, this apologue suggests three types of considerations with respect to the general question that I would like to discuss here.

1/ From a *methodological* point of view, it seems to me that we are dealing with an exemplary case of an analysis that can be conducted either in Durkheimian terms—in which the norm can be understood as a constraint that rises from the group—or in terms of the sociology of action—in which every agent reinvents the expected gesture and opens the relationship, since it is quite possible that for various reasons one customer or the other may fail to perform the exchange.

2/ From an *epistemological* point of view, the question arises of reciprocity understood as an *exchange*. Exchanges are often interpreted as being exchanges of goods, and therefore implicitly understood as trade. This amounts to assuming that reciprocity is necessarily self-interested—a suspicion that runs through our entire philosophical tradition, especially since the emergence of political economy (recent examples can be observed in writings by Levinas and Derrida). We must therefore understand reciprocity according to a concept of exchange free from such presuppositions.

3/ Finally, from a point of view that could be called *ontological*, the question will be to determine what the universal character of the norm of reciprocity implies. Can it be presupposed to have a transcendental moral status (this appears to be Gouldner's position) without appealing to a principle understood as a cause? What we need, on the contrary, is to understand in action how the very relationship of reply is the source of the emergence of the norm.

My purpose in this presentation is not to discuss these three dimensions of the problem as such, but to keep them in mind throughout our debate.

2. Reexamining Gouldner's and Sahlins' Approaches

As a starting point, let us briefly reexamine an article by Gouldner in order to understand how he reaches the conclusion mentioned above, after which we will discuss Sahlins' text, "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange,"⁷ which is entirely

⁷ Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, Chicago, Aldine-Atherton, 1972, Chap. 5, p. 185-275.

dedicated to the question of reciprocity, considered based on ethnographic data and with several references to Gouldner's article. My purpose in presenting and discussing those two well-known texts is to approach the question of the norm of reciprocity by situating it within a debate that remains relevant today, even though some of its aspects are outdated. Above all, this dialogue will show the stakes in a sharper light by analyzing their controversial character as elements of agreement and disagreement.

From the outset, Gouldner notes two important points: 1/ the idea of reciprocity seems to be present and central in all kinds of present or ancient societies; 2/ in spite of this, it is one of the most obscure and ambiguous among sociological concepts. – The first third of Gouldner's article is dedicated to situating the concept of reciprocity within the framework of functionalist theory, which was then dominant in American sociology (under the leadership of R. K. Merton and T. Parsons). I will not develop this point. Let us just remember that the functionalist approach—which calls on both Weber and Simmel—is a theory of action. The functionalist approach understands every action as an interaction; this constitutes a fundamental theoretical choice. Let us also recall that for the functionalists the essential problem is *social stability*; it is thus important for them to know whether every interaction is *reciprocal*, and if so to specify what reciprocity means. Is it a causal interdependence between actions—as an objective process—or an exchange of services between agents—as intentional choices? Without answering those questions from the outset, Gouldner discusses two concepts that were then of concern to functionalists: 1/ the concept of the *persistence* of institutions or norms whose function seems to have disappeared; is this the case of the norm of reciprocity?; 2/ the concept of inequality—of status or of power—that threatens social stability; in this case, how can reciprocity between unequal agents exist without amounting to *exploitation*? – I will not consider this discussion in detail, since it is not central to our present approach. More relevant to our debate is Gouldner's attempt to define the very concept of reciprocity. He first discusses the way Parsons uses the concept. Parsons appears to fully grasp its importance, proclaiming that "It is inherent in the nature of social interaction that the satisfaction of ego's need-dispositions is contingent on alter's reaction and vice-

versa.”⁸ Such a conception perfectly meets the requirement of social stability that is of concern to the functionalists. In this case, reciprocity is at the core of every interaction. But how does Parsons understand reciprocity, Gouldner asks, if not as a mere symmetrical phenomenon that ignores the degrees of relationships between agents? According to Gouldner, such reciprocity is nothing more than *complementariness*. He notes that the definition of complementariness is logical: the rights x of Ego are matched by the duties $-y$ of Alter. Conversely, the duties $-x$ of Alter are matched by the rights y of Ego. Those are nothing more than *analytical* propositions stating that a specific right on one side *entails* a matching duty on the other. And yet the pragmatic approach requires more than this formal view: it *empirically* refers to the fact that every agent has at the same time rights and duties, at different levels and according to different roles. The system is therefore a more complex one, as is the interaction.

In order to deal with this complexity, Gouldner calls on a different author, the anthropologist Malinowski. The work Gouldner focuses on is not Malinowski's seminal 1922 investigation, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*,⁹ but his synthetic book, *Crime and Customs*,¹⁰ published later, in 1932. Malinowski wonders why in primitive cultures the members of a given society obey certain rules? What is the source of the feeling of obligation in such cases as the relationship of reciprocity? From the outset, Malinowski's answer is explicitly anti-Durkheimian: what generates conformity to the norm is not a transcendent representation society would have of itself, but the fact that every agent experiences the obligation as a reply to such and such partner. In a more general way, it is a feeling of obligation experienced toward another agent in every situation of exchange. This is clearly a pragmatist position.

Gouldner thus draws a contrast between Malinowski and Parsons. For Malinowski, what is involved is not a formal complementariness between rights and duties (an analytic proposition, since rights and duties entail each other) but an exchange of goods between real agents who are different from each other and who need the products offered by the others. There is therefore a factual interdependence in a relationship with others: in certain Trobriand islands, coastal villages thus exchange in a friendly spirit fish for yams grown by inland villages. All

⁸ A. Gouldner, *op. cit.* p.167.

⁹ B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972 [orig. 1922].

¹⁰ B. Malinowski, *Crime and Customs in Savage Society*, London, Routledge, 1926.

sorts of different exchanges take place within the group in the same spirit of reciprocity. Gouldner wonders why they can take place *in general*, since the situations vary. According to him, this cannot result from a division of labor, since in many cases no such division is involved. Neither can it be the result of any abstract representation of the norm by the group, as Malinowski shows. Nor can the norm be exclusively linked to the partners' statuses, since it applies to very diverse social situations. It must therefore be stated that *the norm of reciprocity applies in every case as a reply to the action of others as such*. Gouldner's conclusion is that the norm is a general one and has a moral nature. From then on, Gouldner systematically calls it the *general norm of reciprocity*, presupposing its universality and stating the norm in the terms quoted at the beginning of this presentation--terms that so strikingly coincide with what tradition calls the Golden Rule. Let us quote Gouldner once more: "I suggest that a norm of reciprocity, in its universal form, makes two interrelated, minimal demands: (1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them."¹¹ This shift from the social to the moral realm may seem hasty, and indeed I believe that it is, even if it may prove to be legitimate in certain respects. In any case, since Gouldner considers that this point has been convincingly established, he then proposes to resolve a certain number of difficulties that sociological theories--and above all functionalist theories--confronted at the time. Without taking up those considerations, let us note two highly problematic points in Gouldner's analysis:

- At no time does he suspect that the slightest difference might exist between reciprocity in useful exchanges and reciprocity in gift exchanges (this difference was the core of Malinowski's argument in *Argonauts*).

At a more general level, although Gouldner does problematize the concept of reciprocity (at least to some extent), he does not question the concept of norm (is the norm prescriptive, evaluative, or descriptive?).

- Finally, in order to properly direct our next questions, we must ask if the moral conclusion stated by Gouldner in any way clarifies the case of the exchange of flasks of wine described by Lévi-Strauss, since the purpose of that exchange is neither to help the partner nor to avoid harming him (as stated in the two formulations of the norm). We sense that Gouldner misses something essential,

¹¹ A. Gouldner, art. cit., p. 171.

even though he deserves considerable credit for underlining the fact that the behavior of reciprocity first occurs as a pragmatic reply to the action of another agent.

Before returning to the core of the debate, I would now like to discuss Sahlins' text titled "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange," which constitutes Chapter Five of *Stone Age Economics*.¹² That chapter could have been titled "Figures of Reciprocity." It is important to note from the outset that Chapter Five follows several chapters dedicated to the primitive economy--forms of subsistence and exchange—and that the preceding chapter deals with ritual giving. In Chapter Five, Sahlins discusses various forms of exchange practiced in those societies. Following Karl Polanyi,¹³ he takes up the distinction between system of reciprocity and system of redistribution. The former is the more general, involving all sorts of traditional exchanges; the latter presupposes the emergence of a regulating power—such as chieftdom—that concentrates resources and then distributes them. Sahlins intends to analyze only the system of reciprocity, which is in fact preserved within the system of redistribution. In particular, he notes that in traditional societies the idea of reciprocity pervades every activity; the economy cannot be isolated as an autonomous realm but it remains embedded within the social interactions that aim at reinforcing the bonds between agents. Starting from those important remarks, Sahlins proposes to develop a general model of reciprocity, somewhat in the way Gouldner—whom Sahlins quotes—attempts to define a norm. In a way, Sahlins would make it possible to provide empirical data supporting Gouldner's hypothesis. What is Sahlins' general model? He describes it as including three main levels or fields, which form "poles."

1- The first pole is titled *pole of generalized reciprocity or solidarity*. It concerns exchanges of all kinds involving sharing, hospitality, or free giving (i.e. without expectation of reciprocation); it can consist of sharing of food or giving services. The relationship between agents is personal and warm. Reciprocating gestures are possible but are not imperative and remain at most at the far edge of the relationship.

2- The 2nd pole is called *balanced or symmetrical reciprocity*. It concerns direct exchanges, tit for tat; the relationship is simultaneous and it may involve

¹² M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, op. cit.

¹³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Boston, Beacon Pr., 1957 [orig. 1944].

material goods, services, matrimonial alliances, or useful goods—i.e. barter. The relationship is more impersonal and distant, more formal and subject to strict rules of equivalence; reciprocation is most often imperative and is generally expected to occur soon.

3- The 3rd pole is called *negative or non-sociable reciprocity*. It involves taking rather than giving, or at least bitterly negotiating the goods exchanged. The partner remains a stranger. Each agent seeks his own personal profit above everything else. According to this logic, an economy develops that aims only at maximizing the advantages of agents and groups against those of others; it is above all an economy that tends to be satisfied with its own performance, without any concern for social relationships. In other words, Sahlins' negative reciprocity means absence of reciprocity in the sense described in pole 1.

Although I find some of the analyses in this chapter—on money, genealogical ranking, or dissymmetrical exchange—fertile and luminous, I must say that I find Sahlins' model almost entirely useless to an understanding of the norm of reciprocity. In other words, I do not consider it relevant. My claim may appear harsh, but it seems inevitable. The objections that confront each of the three types of reciprocity defined by Sahlins are the following:

- The 1st case appears to be the most positive; however, it is also probably the least clear since generosity is all the more valued because it is practiced without any expected reciprocation, in other words without reciprocity. We must then acknowledge that Sahlins chooses the wrong concept: what he describes is above all generous, unilateral giving ("a sustained one-way flow,"¹⁴ he writes). This is the order of grace or solidarity (forms of giving indeed, but forms whose specificity is precisely that they do not presuppose or require any reciprocation).

- The 2nd case is clearly that of giving and reciprocating, gift and counter-gift, but Sahlins suspects it of being too limited and too fast. In this case, replying is often imperative, whether it involves ritual giving or barter. This is an important point, since it is well-known that an immediate exchange tends to release the partners from their relationship, whereas a delayed exchange invites or compels the partners to establish a lasting bond and thus to continue their encounters and their exchanges in order to ensure and extend trust. Sahlins' questioning of the immediate form of exchange is thus perfectly relevant. The problematic element in

¹⁴ M. Sahlins, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

his definition of this 2nd pole of reciprocity is the way he consistently bundles gift exchanges with commercial exchanges. In fact, we know that the reciprocity that characterizes gift exchanges is primarily agonistic and festive and aims at reciprocal recognition; whereas the reciprocity that characterizes exchanges of useful goods—barter or trade—aims at exact equivalence, even if social relationships of esteem or trust—or sometimes their opposite—remain relevant.

- In the 3rd case, the phrase “negative reciprocity” is puzzling, since it means non-reciprocity, and therefore, according to Sahlins, non-generosity. In this category he places trade, which aims at exact equivalence. But does this entail an absence of reciprocity? It is well-known that the contract (and in particular the contract of sales) is a major and perfectly positive form of reciprocity, which does belong to different order than ritual agonistic giving, but nonetheless entails a negotiation between two partners. Contractual reciprocity is in fact a crucial concept in the doctrine of commercial law and even of civil law. It involves justice in exchanges rather than any “negative reciprocity.” Sahlins’ phrase can however be used in a perfectly obvious but entirely different sense--which he ignores--, with respect to the violent form of reciprocity that characterizes a struggle—sometimes to the death--between two opponents. Its most common expression is the vindictory reply,¹⁵ in which opponents return a blow for a blow according to protocols accepted by both sides.

Those shortcomings and contradictions may seem surprising on Sahlins’ part. How can we explain them? First, it seems obvious that Sahlins often uses the concept of reciprocity in a loose or even in an indeterminate manner. He employs it as a quasi-synonym of generosity (as in his pole 1). But generosity without expectation of reciprocation is by definition outside of any relationship of reciprocity. Reciprocity is, by hypothesis, *dual* (I will return to this point). In fact, Sahlins himself states this several times, without realizing the contradiction involved. On the other hand, solidarity, which is also valorized in pole 1, is *plural* (and thus pertains to *mutuality*, as we will see).

Another major problem seems to me to run throughout Chapter Five, and even throughout the book : Sahlins’ failure to establish any real distinction between

¹⁵ On this point, see R. Verdier [Ed.] *La Vengeance* [4 vol.], Paris, Cujas, 1980-1986. Verdier rightly underlines that procedures of vengeance often involve the same agents and sometimes the same goods as does gift exchange, in particular in the case of matrimonial alliance. See also Mark. R. Anspach, *A charge de revanche. Figures élémentaires de la réciprocité*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.

gift exchanges and commercial exchanges. More precisely, he talks of gift as such only when giving is unilateral; whenever giving is reciprocal (in the strict sense) Sahlins classifies it within the category of the exchange of goods in general, which includes useful goods. This is unfortunately inconsistent with a clear understanding of the diversity of the forms of giving and with a coherent and rigorous concept of reciprocity. In any case, Sahlins' three-pole model, just like Gouldner's general norm, does not help us understand the gesture of the restaurant customers who fill each other's glass with wine.

3. *The Three Major Forms of Giving*

We must therefore return to the specificity of the problem of giving. I will not repeat a demonstration that was presented elsewhere¹⁶ but I will briefly discuss the need for a consistent distinction between three very different forms of giving:

1/ *Ceremonial giving* in traditional societies is always *reciprocal* because its purpose is for the partners to accept one another, *to provide public recognition among human groups*, to establish an alliance and thus to ensure peace. In this case reciprocity is indispensable because it constitutes the relationship between an offer and a reply; it presupposes that a bond must be established or reinforced between two partners; it is expressed in Greek by the prefix *anti* (as in *dosis/antidosis*: gift/counter-gift).

2/ *Gracious giving*--from parent to child, friend to friend, or lover to lover--is meant above all to make others happy. It is a gesture without any expectation of reciprocation and without any association with a situation of scarcity. It is *unilateral* giving, whose purpose is not to meet a need; such is Roman *gratia*, or *charis*, which in Greek means at the same time joy and grace.

3/ *Giving out of solidarity* is meant for those in need of assistance (whether they are victims of chronic poverty or of natural or social catastrophes). In this case there is scarcity, and the purpose of the gift is to provide support to those in need (which is irrelevant in cases 1 and 2). Support can be unilateral or provided through mutual assistance between members of a community or between different groups, whether or not they know each other.

¹⁶ M. Hénaff, *Le Prix de la Vérité: Don, l'argent, la philosophie*, Paris, Seuil, 2002 [*The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, forthcoming, Stanford University Press, 2010 --- Italian transl. *Il Prezzo della Verità. Dono, Denaro, Filosofia*, Roma, Città Aperta, 2005].

In the first case, what is sought through the things given is not to exchange resources but *to recognize each other* and to establish an alliance. The goods chosen are precious things, not meant for utilitarian purposes; they are above all *symbols of the relationship* that testify to the *public* bond established between human groups. The exogamic exchange is its most fundamental and complete form. In the second case, what is sought through generous giving is to testify to the giver's affection or esteem. In this case also, the goods given have a precious and festive character (jewels, flowers, artwork, or prestigious clothing, food, or drinks). In the third case, however, the goods offered are *useful* as such because they are above all means of survival; and yet they do not belong to the realm of business. In this case generosity obviously takes on a moral dimension of compassion, support, and solidarity with persons and groups subjected to the test of hunger, disease, homelessness, or even the loss of their motherland.

It is thus clear that an economic interpretation would be sterile and even misleading in each of the cases discussed above. This means that it is crucial to avoid placing the different forms of exchange on the same level. Gifts may be useful; the logic of gift exchange, however, is not utilitarian. Reciprocity can be advantageous, and yet it is not defined by that character. We must still try to precisely understand this.

4. *The Constitutive Modes of Reciprocity*

The common usage of the term reciprocity seems overly loose in that it makes shifts possible from one meaning to another according to the needs of the argument. This makes it necessary to set certain distinctions. The elements discussed above suggest that reciprocity involves at least two fundamental dimensions or modes: complementariness and reactivity. Each of those dimensions has a static as well as a dynamic aspect. Let us consider them briefly.

A - *Reciprocity as Complementariness: Symmetry and Interdependence*

1 - *Symmetry* : it can involve rights and duties (as in Parsons). It is a relationship of reversed implication—of the right side vs. flipside type. This principled (or analytical) entailment can be experienced by each of the agents as

calling for a similar attitude. However, this static structure can generate a dynamic complementariness, but one that must be understood in terms of action (as we will see below).

2 – *Interdependence* : in this case reciprocity emerges through the specialization and the distribution of functions. Such is the *complementariness* of social activities, of trades in particular. This was already Aristotle's view; in *Politics* V:8, he defines the *koinonia* as a community of interests capable of balancing the diversity of trades. The function of money is then to perform a proportional equivalence between the goods produced, as well as between the producers. Without that equivalence, they would remain heterogeneous to each other. That type of reciprocity amounts to a relationship of interdependence between the parties involved, within an organic whole.¹⁷ This runs the risk of ascribing intentionality to those parties in the manner of Panurge, whose *Praise of Debt*¹⁸ ascribes to stars and all other cosmic elements the need to depend upon one another in order to prevent a breach of the bond that unites them. In any case, through a contrast Rabelais' parody suggests the following lesson: reciprocity presupposes intentionality and it involves human action. From this point of view—the point of view of action—complementariness remains an insufficient notion, as Gouldner shows. It manifests a structure and a condition but it does not explain how reciprocation is possible or how agents reply to each other.

B –*Reciprocity as Reactivity: Alternation and Reply*

1 – *Alternation* – At a second level, reciprocity is understood as a returning movement that is part of a cycle or as the movement of a mobile that flows back or rebounds after hitting an obstacle. It is an alternating, back-and-forth movement (this was a frequent sense of the Latin word *reciprocitas*: advance and retreat, ebb and flow). That type of alternation becomes more complex when it involves an agent exchanging his position with that of another agent. Yet what is thus defined is a mere commutability and it does not convey the idea of an *intentional action*. This tends to retain a conception of reciprocity as a mere rotation between different

¹⁷ Kant considers a similar kind of whole when, in the "Analytic of Principles" of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, he defines this reciprocity as one of the analogs of experience—the 3rd kind, or simultaneity of actions between substances: « All substances, insofar as they can be perceived as simultaneous in space, are in thoroughgoing interaction » (London, Penguin Books, 2007, p. 227).

¹⁸ F. Rabelais, *The Third Book*, Berkeley, U. California Pr., 1991.

positions: every agent has his turn. However, in this rotation an important element emerges: time has an order. This is the essence of the famous phrase on “the ordinance of time” --*tou chronou taxis*-- in Anaximander’s *Fragment IX*.¹⁹ The meaning is : “to everyone his turn” and does not describe a mere distributive mechanism; it defines an immanent form of justice that characterizes the seasons, the ages of life, birth and death. It is an assignation that is associated with our finitude. A *place* must be accepted at a given *time*, and it must be relinquished in the same way : through an ordered sequence, through successiveness, through the movement of time. But this is still a process that occurs, not a deliberate action.

2- *Reply* – We must therefore move on to a different level that integrates (static and simultaneous) complementariness with (dynamic and temporal) alternation into an intentional action. Only the action of an agent can do so. It is a *response* or a *reply* to the action of another agent. This brings us closer to a more coherent definition of reciprocity. From this point of view Sahlins’ analyses include an important element: *dissymmetrical reciprocity*. It means that the reciprocating action (such as a counter-gift) is designed to avoid bringing the relationship to an end, which might occur if the goal sought were equivalence (on the contrary, the aim of the contract is equivalence). This dissymmetry can be generated by a generous reply, beyond what was given in the first place (a reply that threatens to give too much in return and thus to crush the partner), but it stems above all from the fact that the reply is postponed. This dissymmetry thus amounts to a wager placed on time: by delaying the reciprocating gesture, it keeps the desire for partnership alive. It makes more extended systems of alliance possible over a longer extent of time. This always indicates that the groups involved have a high degree of internal cohesion. Lévi-Strauss clearly demonstrates that point with respect to the exogamic rules and in particular with what he calls the “generalized exchange,” in which several human groups have a relationship of alliance based on the following model: $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D$, etc., and in a reciprocating movement: $D \rightarrow C \rightarrow B \rightarrow A$. This means that A, who gave B a wife, will later be given a wife either by B himself or by a third party (as we will see, this involves a network in which dual reciprocity is integrated into a plural mutuality).

19 « And into that from which existing things come-to-be they also pass away according to necessity; for they suffer punishment and pay retribution to one another for their wrongdoing, in accordance with the ordinance of Time», cited in Paul Seligman, *The Apeiron of Anaximander*, London, Athlone Press, 1962.

This gives rise to several questions; let us consider two: first, what is the relationship between reply and *advantage*? Second, how specific is the concept of reciprocity: how can it be distinguished from the concept of *mutuality*?

As for the first point, it is not self-evident that the gesture in reply benefits the agent who incites the reply. It can be said that in this type of action the reply cannot be separated from the original action (in this, complementariness and alternation are well-integrated). Games between partners provide a good example: to receive the ball from a partner and to throw it back to him amount to a single gesture. As Peirce proposes,²⁰ what matters is to understand the action in the game (just as the act of exchanging or of engaging in a contract) as consisting of the following *triad*: agent A and agent B, necessarily *associated according to a law* and interacting through object O. The gesture by which one incites a reply belongs to this type of specifically reciprocal action. This first clarification already makes it possible to dismiss the idea that the agent who incites a reply could be suspected of expecting to receive an advantage. Such an expectation cannot be precluded, but it only concerns particular cases that we will have to define. The first of those cases is of course the contract.

5. Contract and Reciprocity

The analyses presented above concern a social form of reciprocity of an agonistic type, which is defined as a reply--sometimes even a counter--to a given action; in other words, what can more generally be called a *reaction*. That reaction involves a fairly broad range of social behaviors, from the most peaceful to the most violent. Let us mention on one hand friendly exchanges of services provided as a reply to services given, invitations in return, and, of course, exchanges of gifts; on the other hand, forms of violent action such as duels between individuals, blood feuds involving kinship groups, and, at a more serious level, wars between ethnicities or between nations. In parallel to those situations of generous reply or sometimes deadly conflict, let us underline the existence of *playful forms of rivalry*, such as athletic competitions and various team games. Many lessons can be learned from the simulated rivalry that characterizes those games. That simulated rivalry provides models for a formalization of social relationships of reciprocity.

²⁰ Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, Vol. VIII § 321.

The specific feature of those types of agonistic reciprocity is the fact that they mobilize a temporality consistent with what we have called the *alternation* principle. There is a dual dynamic of reaction : first, one partner acts as a reply to a blow or an action by the other partner; in a game, the rule dictates that each player must play in turn (to play twice in a row amounts to cheating). Furthermore, the logic of consecution between action and reaction involves the capacity for an unlimited generation of movement: blood feuds could be endless; ball games could go on until the partners are exhausted; wars could be constantly rekindled--hence the invention of rules whose purpose is to bring that dialectic of endless reengagement to a close. This is why gestures of vengeance follow ritual procedures of resolution called "compositions," in the same way that games involve agents with specific functions, and, above all, that games are restricted to specific time spans. That temporality has in fact two sides : a positive side observed in the exchange of gifts, and a negative side manifested in vengeance or in war. But in both cases that temporality is open to an unrestricted possibility of starting up again. In the case of positive reciprocity, it is important for that openness to be institutionally ensured and preserved (thus the exogamic alliance indexes the renewing of matrimonial unions on the sequence of generations and on the reproduction of life). In the case of negative reciprocity, on the other hand, it is important to set temporal limits to the logic of reply. From this point of view, by simulating rivalry, games provide the best models for the management of antagonism. But couldn't the same thing be said of contractual relationships? It might seem so; and yet, unlike games, contracts do not mimic conflicts. They aim at precluding conflicts through the very procedure of the agreement sought.

In contrast to the types of agonistic reciprocity which we have just examined, and which require procedures of closure in order to preclude an endless rekindling of the rivalry, from the outset contractual reciprocity functions by assigning itself all sorts of precise limitations. If we are to understand this, we cannot restrict our consideration to the contract of purchase and sale. Since that type of contract involves an exchange of goods, let us compare it to the exchange of gifts. Let us say once again that the purpose of gift exchange does not have to do with the goods exchanged but with the relationships established between partners through those goods. This is why the following contrasts can be observed between the two types of exchange:

- With respect to the *goods exchanged*: in the case of the contract (unlike the case of gift exchange) they are chosen by the buyer; their quality and quantity must be defined by a formal agreement (guaranteed by signature or by some other reliable procedure) with the seller. Furthermore, in no way do the goods exchanged constitute symbols of the persons involved in the exchange. In this respect the goods have a neutral status. The Self of the partners is not involved as such in the thing sold (whereas it is involved in the thing given--even if the sale of certain personal goods can imply intense emotions).

- With respect to *time* : the time set for delivery and the time span of the transactions between the partners are defined; a deadline is explicitly agreed upon (with the possibility of renewal by tacit agreement for a specific period). The contractual relationship assigns itself a precise timetable with respect to the sequence of operations : their startup time, unfolding, and closure.

- By hypothesis, the relationships between contractual *partners* per se are decent and courteous, but they can remain indifferent. They can also be friendly, which may play a part in the success of the negotiations. Nevertheless, the final criterion lies in the quality and quantity of the goods provided for the price agreed upon.

- With respect to the *reciprocal obligation*: it is a strictly legal one, and there are provisions for legally defined sanctions in case of breach by one of the partners. In this case also, although trust can be crucial to the start of the negotiation and to the fulfillment of the engagements, any damage incurred must be either compensated through an amicable settlement or subject to a legal procedure.

- From a *social* standpoint, contractual relationships are above all legal relationships; their purpose is not to generate or develop personal or communal bonds but to ensure the proper functioning of exchanges.

To sum up, contractual relationships are symmetrical relationships ruled by notions of equivalence and equity. They make possible an order of justice within the framework of a broader legal, political, and ethical system. It may well be, however, that the contractual model has deeply permeated the political and social thought of western democracies, particularly in northern Europe, precisely where

the Reformation emerged and developed. But this would be the topic of a different debate, both complex and fascinating.²¹

6. *Reciprocity and Mutuality*

It is now clear that, whether it involves rivalry or contractual exchange, reciprocity is a dual relationship. Can we conceive of a bond that would include both the offer and the reply within a peaceful engagement? Isn't this the case of the relationship of mutuality? But how is it different from the relationship of reciprocity? The two concepts appear to be interchangeable. What could be the difference between reciprocal love and mutual love? I believe however that a clear distinction must be established. Other authors, such as Ricœur, also consider this distinction.²² The core of their argument is most often situated in the moral realm: because reciprocity incites or expects a reply, it appears to indicate the seeking of an advantage; in addition, it remains agonistic and requesting, whereas mutuality appears to show more generosity and solidarity, i.e. a lack of self-interest. This is close to the conception of reciprocity as a movement of return to the Same, in the terms of Levinas. This clearly or implicitly moral criterion seems to me to be insufficient or even misleading. The difference between the concepts of reciprocity and mutuality engages other levels that involve the number of agents, the relationship to time, and finally the nature of the action.

a/ *The number of agents.* This makes it easier to understand how reciprocity is *always dual*. It is a relationship between two partners—whether individuals or groups—in a position of interlocution. It can give rise to either a conflict or an alliance. It is a confrontation, whether benevolent or hostile. This is precisely the field of the Greek concept of *agôn*, which can be formulated as follows: 1 vs. 1. Mutuality, on the other hand, is more open—or more indeterminate. It can be dual (as in mutual love); but in that case duality is merely the first module in a plural relationship. It can therefore be formulated as 2 + *n*. Mutuality bonds together the many members of a group. It constitutes a network. It is understood as an

²¹ On this topic, the readers will find more in the two following studies: M. Hénaff, "Religious Ethic, Grace and Capitalism," *European Journal of Sociology*, 3, 2004, pp. 293-324, and "Gift, Market and Social Justice," in R. Gotoh & P. Dumouchel, eds., *Against Injustice, The New Economics of Amartya Sen*, Cambridge U. P., 2009 [forthcoming].

²² See Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard U. P., 2005, p. 219 sq. See also A. Garapon, "Justice et reconnaissance," in *Esprit*, March-April 2006, "La pensée Ricœur," p. 229-238.

association between several agents (including at the legal level of mutual organizations, called *les mutuelles* in French). It involves the idea of *solidarity* rather than of conflict (even if enmity can also be mutual), of sharing rather than of return.

b/ *The criterion of time*: because relationships of reciprocity function based on an alternation between proposition and reply, between offer and response, they can never presuppose a continuous time. Every action implies a reaction. There is a constant push and push back, and a forward movement in and through that very alternation. In relationships of mutuality, on the other hand, there is a more even and continuous circulation, and thus a temporal continuity that has to do with the very consistency of the group.

c/ Finally, if we consider *the nature of the action*, the difference is even more obvious: in the case of reciprocity, the action of one agent always depends on the action of the other. The sequence of events involves indeterminacy, uncertainty, and risk. The action takes place in a permanent state of imbalance. It is characterized by *alternating dissymmetry* (as when a ball is sent back and forth, or when presents are ceremonially exchanged). In the case of mutuality, on the other hand, there is a general state of balance, a homogeneity that spreads to all the members of the group: there is *multiplied symmetry* (as in the Hobbesian contract of peace “of everyone with everyone”). Let us note that those two concepts of reciprocity and mutuality, which belong to the Latin heritage, are explicitly marked in French and in English, among other languages, but are less so in Greek and in German, languages in which they are nevertheless present and clearly expressed: in Greek, reciprocity is indicated through the prefix *anti* (as in *dosis/antidosis*: gift/counter-gift) and mutuality through the preposition *pros* (*pros allelous*, i.e. the ones for the others). The same kind of difference also exists in German between *gegen* and *zu*. To summarize, it can be said that reciprocity is above all a form of logic or a mechanism: action/reaction; attack/reply. Mutuality has to do with a decision to establish a bond, with an ethic of sharing; it indicates a freely-chosen disposition.

Ricœur, who considers this difference, establishes a distinction between the “logic of reciprocity” and a “phenomenology of mutuality,” probably because the latter cannot be predicted and must be empirically observed. What appears to make mutuality more comforting or even more generous is the fact that it

presupposes that we have moved beyond the space of the *agôn*. The space of mutuality spreads after conflict has been overcome. It is literally a *state of peace*, in the sense Ricœur uses the phrase.²³ It exists only because a common element—*mutuum*—has already been recognized among the members of a community. In that sense, it presupposes that the difference between the alien and the self, between otherness and sameness, has been accepted. Mutuality belongs to the realm of convention, to the space of free will, and thus to the order of justice. It is even more: it is shared benevolence. In that sense, it operates through time. It seeks continuity. It amounts to instituted and renewed trust. Reciprocity, on the other hand, indicates the seeking of trust through the encounter: trust in the process of being established or in the process of failing. It is the constantly reborn moment of genesis and of risk, whereas mutuality is the moment of the result and of acquired equilibrium.

7. Conclusion: Reciprocity and Otherness

The fact that reciprocity (as social interaction) is always *dual* and always involves two partners—whether persons or groups—in a relationship of action/reaction, is a fundamental fact. It implies a relationship between the Self and the Other. Language expresses this as the I/You relationship. The fact of otherness is crucial from the point of view of a pragmatic approach: it means that the social bond must be viewed as constantly in the process of being constituted or renewed in the relationships between the agents themselves, rather than assumed to be already given and produced by the institutions that aim at preserving it and at determining its protocols. As Malinowski points out, the social obligation appears in the reply given by one agent to the action of another agent. Or, as Simmel forcefully states, « "Society exists wherever there is reciprocal action between several individuals. »²⁴ The norm is manifested and reaffirmed in the relationship itself. No matter how imperative it may be, it is not determined by an autonomous mechanism. Neither is it the logical converse of a symmetrical arrangement (unlike

²³ Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard U. Pr., 2005, Chapter 3.

²⁴ Georg Simmel. [orig. 1908] *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, Dunker & Humblot, Berlin, 1958. [our translation] - French trans. « Il y a société là où il y a action réciproque de plusieurs individus. *Soziologie. Etudes sur les formes de la socialisation*, Paris, PUF. 1992, p. 43. [No English version is available].

the complementariness between rights and duties). The question raised by the confrontation with the Other is that of his acceptance or rejection. This implies a fundamental indeterminacy in the relationship. This indeterminacy is an existential fact. The response of the other remains unpredictable even if the norm is prescriptive. To say that the interaction is reciprocal is to say that my action is a reaction to the action of the other. Because the otherness of the other raises an absolute limit to my own action, the relationship of reciprocity is inaugural, inevitable, and non-predictable. The other cannot be inferred; his existence is an event that affects me. Reciprocity makes it possible to invent a bond in the paradox of a confrontation in which each agent affirms himself and opposes the other, while being at the same time called upon to accept—or to reject—the other. The requirement—or the norm—of reciprocity provides each partner with the ability to accept and transgress the distance that separates him/her from the other. The other thus calls on me to open the pact or to enter the convention that I sign by my reply. At stake is the recognition of one partner and of the other, of one by the other, in a dual relationship of challenge and agonistic confrontation: acceptance or rejection. And yet, that dual and inaugural relationship of recognition opens the way to *plural mutuality* : plurality begins with two agents before it extends to the entire group. Two customers exchange their flasks of wine, and soon an entire table does the same and rejoices in being together.

Translated from French by Jean-Louis Morhange

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