

Chapter Five

A BRIEF TREATISE ON THE MORAL GROUNDS OF ECONOMIC RELATIONS

TO TELL THE HISTORY of debt, then, is also necessarily to reconstruct how the language of the marketplace has come to pervade every aspect of human life—even to provide the terminology for the moral and religious voices ostensibly raised against it. We have already seen how both Vedic and Christian teachings thus end up making the same curious move: first describing all morality as debt, but then, in their very manner of doing so, demonstrating that morality cannot really be reduced to debt, that it must be grounded in something else.¹

But what? Religious traditions prefer vast, cosmological answers: the alternative to the morality of debt lies in recognition of continuity with the universe, or life in the expectation of the imminent annihilation of the universe, or absolute subordination to the deity, or withdrawal into another world. My own aims are more modest, so I will take the opposite approach. If we really want to understand the moral grounds of economic life, and by extension, human life, it seems to me that we must start instead with the very small things: the everyday details of social existence, the way we treat our friends, enemies, and children—often with gestures so tiny (passing the salt, bumming a cigarette) that we ordinarily never stop to think about them at all. Anthropology has shown us just how different and numerous are the ways in which humans have been known to organize themselves. But it also reveals some remarkable commonalities—fundamental moral principles that appear to exist everywhere, and that will always tend to be invoked, wherever people transfer objects back and forth or argue about what other people owe them.

One of the reasons that human life is so complicated, in turn, is because many of these principles contradict one another. As we will see, they are constantly pulling us in radically different directions. The moral logic of exchange, and hence of debt, is only one; in any given situation, there are likely to be completely different principles that

could be brought to bear. In this sense, the moral confusion discussed in the first chapter is hardly new; in a sense, moral thought is founded on this very tension.



To really understand what debt is, then, it will be necessary to understand how it's different from other sorts of obligation that human beings might have to one another—which, in turn, means mapping out what those other sorts of obligation actually are. Doing so, however, poses peculiar challenges. Contemporary social theory—economic anthropology included—offers surprisingly little help in this regard. There's an enormous anthropological literature on gifts, for instance, starting with the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss's essay of 1925, even on "gift economies" that operate on completely different principles than market economies—but in the end, almost all this literature concentrates on the exchange of gifts, assuming that whenever one gives a gift, this act incurs a debt, and the recipient must eventually reciprocate in kind. Much as in the case of the great religions, the logic of the marketplace has insinuated itself even into the thinking of those who are most explicitly opposed to it. As a result, I am going to have to start over here, to create a new theory, pretty much from scratch.

Part of the problem is the extraordinary place that economics currently holds in the social sciences. In many ways it is treated as a kind of master discipline. Just about anyone who runs anything important in America is expected to have some training in economic theory, or at least to be familiar with its basic tenets. As a result, those tenets have come to be treated as received wisdom, as basically beyond question (one knows one is in the presence of received wisdom when, if one challenges it, the first reaction is to treat one as simply ignorant—"You obviously have never heard of the Laffer Curve"; "Clearly you need a course in Economics 101"—the theory is seen as so obviously true that no one who understands it could possibly disagree.) What's more, those branches of social theory that make the greatest claims to "scientific status"—"rational choice theory," for instance—start from the same assumptions about human psychology that economists do: that human beings are best viewed as self-interested actors calculating how to get the best terms possible out of any situation, the most profit or pleasure or happiness for the least sacrifice or investment—curious, considering experimental psychologists have demonstrated over and over again that these assumptions simply aren't true.²

From early on, there were those who wished to create a theory of social interaction grounded in a more generous view of human nature—insisting that moral life comes down to something more than mutual advantage, that it is motivated above all by a sense of justice. The key term here became “reciprocity,” the sense of equity, balance, fairness, and symmetry, embodied in our image of justice as a set of scales. Economic transactions were just one variant of the principle of balanced exchange—and one that had a notorious tendency to go awry. But if one examines matters closely, one finds that all human relations are based on some variation on reciprocity.

In the 1950s, '60s and '70s, there was something of a craze for this sort of thing, in the guise of what was then called “exchange theory,” developed in infinite variations, from George Homans’ “Social Exchange Theory” in the United States to Claude Levi-Strauss’s Structuralism in France. Levi-Strauss, who became a kind of intellectual god in anthropology, made the extraordinary argument that human life could be imagined as consisting of three spheres: language (which consisted of the exchange of words), kinship (which consisted of the exchange of women), and economics (which consisted of the exchange of things). All three, he insisted, were governed by the same fundamental law of reciprocity.³

Levi-Strauss’s star is fallen now, and such extreme statements seem, in retrospect, a little bit ridiculous. Still, it’s not as if anyone has proposed a bold new theory to replace all this. Instead, the assumptions have simply retreated into the background. Almost everyone continues to assume that in its fundamental nature, social life is based on the principle of reciprocity, and therefore that all human interaction can best be understood as a kind of exchange. If so, then debt really is at the root of all morality, because debt is what happens when some balance has not yet been restored.

But can all justice really be reduced to reciprocity? It’s easy enough to come up with forms of reciprocity that don’t seem particularly just. “Do unto others as you would wish others to do unto you” might seem like an excellent foundation for a system of ethics, but for most of us, “an eye for an eye” does not evoke justice so much as vindictive brutality.⁴ “One good turn deserves another” is a pleasant sentiment, but “I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine” is shorthand for political corruption. Conversely, there are relationships that seem clearly moral but appear to have nothing to do with reciprocity. The relation between mother and child is an oft-cited example. Most of us learn our sense of justice and morality first from our parents. Yet it is extremely difficult to see the relation between parent and child as particularly reciprocal.

Would we really be willing to conclude that therefore it is not a moral relationship? That it has nothing to do with justice?

The Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood begins a recent book on debt with a similar paradox:

Nature Writer Ernest Thompson Seton had an odd bill presented to him on his twenty-first birthday. It was a record kept by his father of all the expenses connected with young Ernest's childhood and youth, including the fee charged by the doctor for delivering him. Even more oddly, Ernest is said to have paid it. I used to think that Mr. Seton Senior was a jerk, but now I'm wondering.⁵

Most of us wouldn't wonder much. Such behavior seems monstrous, inhuman. Certainly Seton did: he paid the bill, but never spoke to his father again afterward.⁶ And in a way, this is precisely why the presentation of such a bill seems so outrageous. Squaring accounts means that the two parties have the ability to walk away from each other. By presenting it, his father suggested he'd just as soon have nothing further to do with him.

In other words, while most of us can imagine what we owe to our parents as a kind of debt, few of us can imagine being able to actually pay it—or even that such a debt ever *should* be paid. Yet if it can't be paid, in what sense is it a “debt” at all? And if it is not a debt, what is it?



One obvious place to look for alternatives is in cases of human interaction in which expectations of reciprocity seem to slam into a wall. Nineteenth-century travelers' accounts, for instance, are full of this sort of thing. Missionaries working in certain parts of Africa would often be astounded by the reactions they would receive when they administered medicines. Here's a typical example, from a British missionary in Congo:

A day or two after we reached Vana we found one of the natives very ill with pneumonia. Comber treated him and kept him alive on strong fowl-soup; a great deal of careful nursing and attention was visited on him, for his house was beside the camp. When we were ready to go on our way again, the man was well. To our astonishment he came and asked us for a

present, and was as astonished and disgusted as he had made us to be, when we declined giving it. We suggested that it was his place to bring us a present and to show some gratitude. He said to us, “Well indeed! You white men have no shame!”⁷

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the French philosopher Lucien Levy-Bruhl, in an attempt to prove that “natives” operated with an entirely different form of logic, compiled a list of similar stories: for instance, of a man saved from drowning who proceeded to ask his rescuer to give him some nice clothes to wear, or another who, on being nursed back to health after having been savaged by a tiger, demanded a knife. One French missionary working in Central Africa insisted that such things happened to him on a regular basis:

You save a person’s life, and you must expect to receive a visit from him before long; you are now under an obligation to him, and you will not get rid of him except by giving him presents.⁸

Now, certainly, there is almost always felt to be something extraordinary about saving a life. Anything surrounding birth and death almost cannot help but partake of the infinite, and, therefore, throw all everyday means of moral calculation askew. This is probably why stories like this had become something of a cliché in America when I was growing up. I remember as a child several times being told that among the Inuit (or sometimes it was among Buddhists, or Chinese, but curiously, never Africans)—that if one saves someone else’s life, one is considered responsible for taking care of that person forever. It defies our sense of reciprocity. But somehow, it also makes a weird kind of sense.

We have no way of knowing what was really going on in the minds of the patients in these stories, since we don’t know who they were or what sort of expectations they had (how they normally interacted with their doctors, for example). But we can guess. Let’s try a thought experiment. Imagine that we are dealing with a place where, if one man saved another’s life, the two became like brothers. Each was now expected to share everything, and to provide for the other when he was in need. If so, the patient would surely notice that his new brother appeared to be extraordinarily wealthy, not in much need of anything, but that he, the patient, was lacking in many things the missionary could provide.

Alternately (and more likely), imagine that we are dealing not with a relationship of radical equality but the very opposite. In many parts

of Africa, accomplished curers were also important political figures with extensive clienteles of former patients. A would-be follower thus arrives to declare his political allegiance. What complicates the matter in this case is that followers of great men, in this part of Africa, were in a relatively strong bargaining position. Good henchmen were hard to come by; important people were expected to be generous with followers to keep them from joining some rival's entourage instead. If so, asking for a shirt or knife would be a way of asking for confirmation that the missionary does wish to have the man as a follower. Paying him back, in contrast, would be, like Seton's gesture to his father, an insult: a way of saying that despite the missionary having saved his life, he would just as soon have nothing further to do with him.



This is a thought experiment—because we don't really know what the African patients were thinking. The point is that such forms of radical equality and radical inequality do exist in the world, that each carries within it its own kind of morality, its own way of thinking and arguing about the rights and wrongs of any given situation, and these moralities are entirely different than that of tit-for-tat exchange. In the rest of the chapter, I will provide a rough-and-ready way to map out the main possibilities, by proposing that there are three main moral principles on which economic relations can be founded, all of which occur in any human society, and which I will call communism, hierarchy, and exchange.

Communism

I will define communism here as any human relationship that operates on the principles of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.”

I admit that the usage here is a bit provocative. “Communism” is a word that can evoke strong emotional reactions—mainly, of course, because we tend to identify it with “communist” regimes. This is ironic, since the Communist parties that ruled over the USSR and its satellites, and that still rule China and Cuba, never described their own systems as “communist.” They described them as “socialist.” “Communism” was always a distant, somewhat fuzzy utopian ideal, usually

to be accompanied by the withering away of the state—to be achieved at some point in the distant future.

Our thinking about communism has been dominated by a myth. Once upon a time, humans held all things in common—in the Garden of Eden, during the Golden Age of Saturn, in Paleolithic hunter-gatherer bands. Then came the Fall, as a result of which we are now cursed with divisions of power and private property. The dream was that someday, with the advance of technology and general prosperity, with social revolution or the guidance of the Party, we would finally be in a position to put things back, to restore common ownership and common management of collective resources. Throughout the last two centuries, Communists and anti-Communists argued over how plausible this picture was and whether it would be a blessing or a nightmare. But they all agreed on the basic framework: communism was about collective property, “primitive communism” did once exist in the distant past, and someday it might return.

We might call this “mythic communism”—or even, “epic communism”—a story we like to tell ourselves. Since the days of the French Revolution, it has inspired millions; but it has also done enormous damage to humanity. It’s high time, I think, to brush the entire argument aside. In fact, “communism” is not some magical utopia, and neither does it have anything to do with ownership of the means of production. It is something that exists right now—that exists, to some degree, in any human society, although there has never been one in which *everything* has been organized in that way, and it would be difficult to imagine how there could be. All of us act like communists a good deal of the time. None of us acts like a communist consistently. “Communist society”—in the sense of a society organized exclusively on that single principle—could never exist. But all social systems, even economic systems like capitalism, have always been built on top of a bedrock of actually-existing communism.

Starting, as I say, from the principle of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” allows us to look past the question of individual or private ownership (which is often little more than formal legality anyway) and at much more immediate and practical questions of who has access to what sorts of things and under what conditions.⁹ Whenever it is the operative principle, even if it’s just two people who are interacting, we can say we are in the presence of a sort of communism.

Almost everyone follows this principle if they are collaborating on some common project.¹⁰ If someone fixing a broken water pipe says, “Hand me the wrench,” his co-worker will not, generally speaking,

say, “And what do I get for it?”—even if they are working for Exxon-Mobil, Burger King, or Goldman Sachs. The reason is simple efficiency (ironically enough, considering the conventional wisdom that “communism just doesn’t work”): if you really care about getting something done, the most efficient way to go about it is obviously to allocate tasks by ability and give people whatever they need to do them.¹¹ One might even say that it’s one of the scandals of capitalism that most capitalist firms, internally, operate communistically. True, they don’t tend to operate very democratically. Most often they are organized around military-style top-down chains of command. But there is often an interesting tension here, because top-down chains of command are not particularly efficient: they tend to promote stupidity among those on top, resentful foot-dragging among those on the bottom. The greater the need to improvise, the more democratic the cooperation tends to become. Inventors have always understood this, start-up capitalists frequently figure it out, and computer engineers have recently rediscovered the principle: not only with things like freeware, which everyone talks about, but even in the organization of their businesses. Apple Computers is a famous example: it was founded by (mostly Republican) computer engineers who broke from IBM in Silicon Valley in the 1980s, forming little democratic circles of twenty to forty people with their laptops in each other’s garages.

This is presumably also why in the immediate wake of great disasters—a flood, a blackout, or an economic collapse—people tend to behave the same way, reverting to a rough-and-ready communism. However briefly, hierarchies and markets and the like become luxuries that no one can afford. Anyone who has lived through such a moment can speak to their peculiar qualities, the way that strangers become sisters and brothers and human society itself seems to be reborn. This is important, because it shows that we are not simply talking about cooperation. In fact, *communism is the foundation of all human sociability*. It is what makes society possible. There is always an assumption that anyone who is not actually an enemy can be expected on the principle of “from each according to their abilities,” at least to an extent: for example, if one needs to figure out how to get somewhere, and the other knows the way.

We so take this for granted, in fact, that the exceptions are themselves revealing. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, an anthropologist who in the 1920s carried out research among the Nuer, Nilotic pastoralists in southern Sudan, reports his discomfiture when he realized that someone had intentionally given him wrong directions:

On one occasion I asked the way to a certain place and was deliberately deceived. I returned in chagrin to camp and asked the people why they had told me the wrong way. One of them replied, “You are a foreigner, why should we tell you the right way? Even if a Nuer who was a stranger asked us the way we would say to him, ‘You continue straight along that path,’ but we would not tell him that the path forked. Why should we tell him? But you are now a member of our camp and you are kind to our children, so we will tell you the right way in future.”¹²

The Nuer are constantly engaged in feuds; any stranger might well turn out to be an enemy there to scout out a good place for an ambush, and it would be unwise to give such a person useful information. What’s more, Evans-Pritchard’s own situation was obviously relevant, since he was an agent of the British government—the same government that had recently sent in the RAF to strafe and bomb the inhabitants of this very settlement before forcibly resettling them there. Under the circumstances, the inhabitants’ treatment of Evans-Pritchard seems quite generous. The main point, though, is that it requires something on this scale—an immediate threat to life and limb, terror-bombing of civilian populations—before people will ordinarily consider not giving a stranger accurate directions.¹³

It’s not just directions. Conversation is a domain particularly disposed to communism. Lies, insults, put-downs, and other sorts of verbal aggression are important—but they derive most of their power from the shared assumption that people do not ordinarily act this way: an insult does not sting unless one assumes that others will normally be considerate of one’s feelings, and it’s impossible to lie to someone who does not assume you would ordinarily tell the truth. When we genuinely wish to break off amicable relations with someone, we stop speaking to them entirely.

The same goes for small courtesies like asking for a light, or even for a cigarette. It seems more legitimate to ask a stranger for a cigarette than for an equivalent amount of cash, or even food; in fact, if one has been identified as a fellow smoker, it’s rather difficult to refuse such a request. In such cases—a match, a piece of information, holding the elevator—one might say the “from each” element is so minimal that most of us comply without even thinking about it. Conversely, the same is true if another person’s need—even a stranger’s—is particularly spectacular or extreme: if he is drowning, for example. If a child has fallen onto the subway tracks, we assume that anyone who is capable of helping her up will do so.

I will call this “baseline communism”: the understanding that, unless people consider themselves enemies, if the need is considered great enough, or the cost considered reasonable enough, the principle of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” will be assumed to apply. Of course, different communities apply very different standards. In large, impersonal urban communities, such a standard may go no further than asking for a light or directions. This might not seem like much, but it founds the possibility of larger social relations. In smaller, less impersonal communities—especially those not divided into social classes—the same logic will likely extend much further: for example, it is often effectively impossible to refuse a request not just for tobacco, but for food—sometimes even from a stranger; certainly from anyone considered to belong to the community. Exactly one page after describing his difficulties in asking for directions, Evans-Pritchard notes that these same Nuer find it almost impossible, when dealing with someone they have accepted as a member of their camp, to refuse a request for almost any item of common consumption, so that a man or woman known to have anything extra in the way of grain, tobacco, tools, or agricultural implements can be expected to see their stockpiles disappear almost immediately.¹⁴ However, this baseline of openhanded sharing and generosity never extends to everything. Often, in fact, things freely shared are treated as trivial and unimportant for that very reason. Among the Nuer, true wealth takes the form of cattle. No one would freely share their cattle; in fact, young Nuer men learn that they are expected to defend their cattle with their lives; for this reason, cattle are neither bought nor sold.

The obligation to share food, and whatever else is considered a basic necessity, tends to become the basis of everyday morality in a society whose members see themselves as equals. Another anthropologist, Audrey Richards, once described how Bemba mothers, “such lax disciplinarians in everything else,” will scold their children harshly if they give one an orange or some other treat and the child does not immediately offer to share it with her friends.¹⁵ But sharing is also, in such societies—in any, if we really think about it—a major focus of life’s pleasures. As a result, the need to share is particularly acute in both the best of times and the worst of times: during famines, for example, but also during moments of extreme plenty. Early missionary accounts of native North Americans almost invariably include awestruck remarks on generosity in times of famine, often to total strangers.¹⁶ At the same time,

On returning from their fishing, their hunting, and their trading, they exchange many gifts; if they have thus obtained something

unusually good, even if they have bought it, or if it has been given to them, they make a feast to the whole village with it. Their hospitality towards all sorts of strangers is remarkable.¹⁷

The more elaborate the feast, the more likely one is to see some combination of free sharing of some things (for instance, food and drink) and careful distribution of others: say, prize meat, whether from game or sacrifice, which is often parceled out according to very elaborate protocols or equally elaborate gift exchange. The giving and taking of gifts often takes on a distinctly gamelike quality, continuous often with the actual games, contests, pageants, and performances that also often mark popular festivals. As with society at large, the shared conviviality could be seen as a kind of communistic base on top of which everything else is constructed. It also helps to emphasize that sharing is not simply about morality, but also about pleasure. Solitary pleasures will always exist, but for most human beings, the most pleasurable activities almost always involve sharing something: music, food, liquor, drugs, gossip, drama, beds. There is a certain communism of the senses at the root of most things we consider fun.

The surest way to know that one is in the presence of communistic relations is that not only are no accounts taken, but it would be considered offensive, or simply bizarre, to even consider doing so. Each village, clan, or nation within the League of the Hodenosaunee, or Iroquois, for example, was divided into two halves.¹⁸ This is a common pattern: in other parts of the world (Amazonia, Melanesia) too, there are arrangements in which members of one side can only marry someone from the other side, or only eat food grown on the other side; such rules are explicitly designed to make each side dependent on the other for some basic necessity of life. Among the Six Iroquois, each side was expected to bury the other's dead. Nothing would be more absurd than for one side to complain that, "last year, we buried five of your dead, but you only buried two of ours."

Baseline communism might be considered the raw material of sociality, a recognition of our ultimate interdependence that is the ultimate substance of social peace. Still, in most circumstances, that minimal baseline is not enough. One always behaves in a spirit of solidarity more with some people than others, and certain institutions are specifically based on principles of solidarity and mutual aid. First among these are those we love, with mothers being the paradigm of selfless love. Others include close relatives, wives and husbands, lovers, one's closest friends. These are the people with whom we share everything, or at least to whom we know we can turn in need, which is the

definition of a true friend everywhere. Such friendships may be formalized by a ritual as “bond-friends” or “blood brothers” who cannot refuse each other anything. As a result, any community could be seen as criss-crossed with relations of “individualistic communism,” one-to-one relations that operate, to varying intensities and degrees, on the basis of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.”¹⁹

This same logic can be, and is, extended within groups: not only cooperative work groups, but almost any in-group will define itself by creating its own sort of baseline communism. There will be certain things shared or made freely available within the group, others that anyone will be expected to provide for other members on request, that one would never share with or provide to outsiders: help in repairing one’s nets in an association of fisherman, stationery supplies in an office, certain sorts of information among commodity traders, and so forth. Also, certain categories of people we can always call on in certain situations, such as harvesting or moving house.²⁰ One could go on from here to various forms of sharing, pooling, who gets to call on whom for help with certain tasks: moving, or harvesting, or even, if one is in trouble, providing an interest-free loan. Finally, there are the different sorts of “commons,” the collective administration of common resources.

The sociology of everyday communism is a potentially enormous field, but one which, owing to our peculiar ideological blinkers, we have been unable to write about because we have been largely unable to see it. Rather than try to further outline it, I will limit myself to three final points.

First, we are not really dealing with reciprocity here—or at best, only with reciprocity in the broadest sense.²¹ What is equal on both sides is the knowledge that the other person *would* do the same for you, not that they necessarily *will*. The Iroquois example brings home clearly what makes this possible: that such relations are based on a presumption of eternity. Society will always exist. Therefore, there will always be a north and a south side of the village. This is why no accounts need be taken. In a similar way, people tend to treat their mothers and best friends as if they will always exist, however well they know it isn’t true.

The second point has to do with the famous “law of hospitality.” There is a peculiar tension between a common stereotype of what are called “primitive societies” (people lacking both states and markets) as societies in which anyone not a member of the community is assumed to be an enemy, and the frequent accounts of early European

travelers awestruck by the extraordinary generosity shown them by actual “savages.” Granted, there is a certain truth to both sides. Whenever a stranger is a dangerous potential enemy, the normal way to overcome the danger is by some dramatic gesture of generosity whose very magnificence catapults them into that mutual sociality that is the ground for all peaceful social relations. True, when one is dealing with completely unknown quantities, there is often a process of testing. Both Christopher Columbus, in Hispaniola, and Captain Cook, in Polynesia, reported similar stories of islanders who either flee, attack, or offer everything—but who often later enter the boats and help themselves to anything they take a fancy to, provoking threats of violence from the crew, who then did their utmost to establish the principle that relations between strange peoples should be mediated instead by “normal” commercial exchange.

It’s understandable that dealings with potentially hostile strangers should encourage an all-or-nothing logic, a tension preserved even in English in the etymology of the words “host,” “hostile,” “hostage,” and indeed “hospitality,” all of which are derived from the same Latin root.²² What I want to emphasize here is that all such gestures are simply exaggerated displays of that very “baseline communism” that I have already argued is the ground of all human social life. This is why, for instance, the difference between friends and enemies is so often articulated through food—and often the most commonplace, humble, domestic sorts of food: as in the familiar principle, common in both Europe and the Middle East, that those who have shared bread and salt must never harm one another. In fact, those things that exist above all to be shared often become those things one *cannot* share with enemies. Among the Nuer, so free with food and everyday possessions, if one man murders another, a blood feud follows. Everyone in the vicinity will often have to line up on one side or another, and those on opposite sides are strictly forbidden to eat with anyone on the other, or even to drink from a cup or bowl one of their newfound enemies has previously used, lest terrible results ensue.²³ The extraordinary inconvenience this creates is a major incentive to try to negotiate some sort of settlement. By the same token, it is often said that people who have shared food, or the right, archetypal kind of food, are forbidden to harm one another, however much they might be otherwise inclined to do so. At times, this can take on an almost comical formality, as in the Arab story of the burglar who, while ransacking someone’s house, stuck his finger in a jar to see if it was full of sugar, only to discover it was full of salt instead. Realizing that he had now eaten salt at the owner’s table, he dutifully put back everything he’d stolen.

Finally, once we start thinking of communism as a principle of morality rather than just a question of property ownership, it becomes clear that this sort of morality is almost always at play to some degree in any transaction—even commerce. If one is on sociable terms with someone, it's hard to completely ignore their situation. Merchants often reduce prices for the needy. This is one of the main reasons why shopkeepers in poor neighborhoods are almost never of the same ethnic group as their customers; it would be almost impossible for a merchant who grew up in the neighborhood to make money, as they would be under constant pressure to give financial breaks, or at least easy credit terms, to their impoverished relatives and school chums. The opposite is true as well. An anthropologist who lived for some time in rural Java once told me that she measured her linguistic abilities by how well she could bargain at the local bazaar. It frustrated her that she could never get it down to a price as low as local people seemed pay. "Well," a Javanese friend finally had to explain, "they charge rich Javanese people more, too."

Once again, we are back to the principle that if the needs (for instance, dire poverty), or the abilities (for instance, wealth beyond imagination), are sufficiently dramatic, then unless there is a complete absence of sociality, some degree of communistic morality will almost inevitably enter into the way people take accounts.²⁴ A Turkish folktale about the Medieval Sufi mystic Nasruddin Hodja illustrates the complexities thus introduced into the very concept of supply and demand:

One day when Nasruddin was left in charge of the local tea-house, the king and some retainers, who had been hunting nearby, stopped in for breakfast.

"Do you have quail eggs?" asked the king.

"I'm sure I can find some," answered Nasruddin.

The king ordered an omelet of a dozen quail eggs, and Nasruddin hurried out to look for them. After the king and his party had eaten, he charged them a hundred gold pieces.

The king was puzzled. "Are quail eggs really that rare in this part of the country?"

"It's not so much quail eggs that are rare around here," Nasruddin replied. "It's more visits from kings."

Exchange

Communism, then, is based neither in exchange nor in reciprocity—except, as I have observed, in the sense that it does involve mutual expectations and responsibilities. Even here, it seems better to use another

word (“mutuality”?) so as to emphasize that exchange operates on entirely different principles; that it’s a fundamentally different kind of moral logic.

Exchange is all about equivalence. It’s a back-and-forth process involving two sides in which each side gives as good as it gets. This is why one can speak of people exchanging words (if there’s an argument), blows, or even gunfire.²⁵ In these examples, it’s not that there is ever an exact equivalence—even if there were some way to measure an exact equivalence—but more a constant process of interaction tending toward equivalence. Actually, there’s something of a paradox here: each side in each case is trying to outdo the other, but, unless one side is utterly put to rout, it’s easiest to break the whole thing off when both consider the outcome to be more or less even. When we move to the exchange of material goods, we find a similar tension. Often there is an element of competition; if nothing else, there’s always that possibility. But at the same time, there’s a sense that both sides are keeping accounts, and that, unlike what happens in communism, which always partakes of a certain notion of eternity, the entire relationship can be canceled out, and either party can call an end to it at any time.

This element of competition can work in completely different ways. In cases of barter or commercial exchange, when both parties to the transaction are only interested in the value of goods being transacted, they may well—as economists insist they should—try to seek the maximum material advantage. On the other hand, as anthropologists have long pointed out, when the exchange is of gifts, that is, the objects passing back and forth are mainly considered interesting in how they reflect on and rearrange relations between the people carrying out the transaction, then insofar as competition enters in, it is likely to work precisely the other way around—to become a matter of contests of generosity, of people showing off who can give more away.

Let me take these one at a time.

What marks commercial exchange is that it’s “impersonal”: who it is that is selling something to us, or buying something from us, should in principle be entirely irrelevant. We are simply comparing the value of two objects. True, as with any principle, in practice, this is rarely completely true. There has to be some minimal element of trust for a transaction to be carried out at all, and, unless one is dealing with a vending machine, that usually requires some outward display of sociality. Even in the most impersonal shopping mall or supermarket, clerks are expected to at least simulate personal warmth, patience, and other reassuring qualities; in a Middle-Eastern bazaar, one might have to go through an elaborate process of establishing a simulated friendship, sharing tea, food, or tobacco, before engaging in similarly elaborate

haggling—an interesting ritual that begins by establishing sociality through baseline communism—and continues with an often prolonged mock battle over prices. It’s all done on the basis of the assumption that buyer and seller are, at least at that moment, friends (and thus each entitled to feel outraged and indignant at the other’s unreasonable demands), but it’s all a little piece of theater. Once the object changes hands, there is no expectation that the two will ever have anything to do with each other again.²⁶

Most often this sort of haggling—in Madagascar the term for it literally means “to battle out a sale” (*miady varotra*)—can be a source of pleasure in itself.

The first time I visited Analakely, the great cloth market in Madagascar’s capital, I came with a Malagasy friend intent on buying a sweater. The whole process took about four hours. It went something like this: my friend would spot a likely sweater hanging in some booth, ask the price, and then she would begin a prolonged battle of wits with the vendor, invariably involving dramatic displays of insult and indignation, and simulated walkings off in disgust. Often it seemed ninety percent of the argument was spent on a final, tiny difference of a few ariary—literally, pennies—that seemed to become a profound matter of principle on either side, since a merchant’s failure to concede it could sink the entire deal.

The second time I visited Analakely I went with another friend, also a young woman, who had a list of measures of cloth to buy supplied by her sister. At each booth she adopted the same procedure: she simply walked up and asked for the price.

The man would quote her one.

“All right,” she then asked, “and what’s your real final price?”

He’d tell her, and she’d hand over the money.

“Wait a minute!” I asked. “You can *do* that?”

“Sure,” she said. “Why not?”

I explained what had happened with my last friend.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “Some people enjoy that sort of thing.”

Exchange allows us to cancel out our debts. It gives us a way to call it even: hence, to end the relationship. With vendors, one is usually only pretending to have a relationship at all. With neighbors, one might for this very reason prefer *not* to pay one’s debts. Laura Bohannan writes about arriving in a Tiv community in rural Nigeria; neighbors immediately began arriving bearing little gifts: “two ears corn, one vegetable marrow, one chicken, five tomatoes, one handful peanuts.”²⁷ Having no idea what was expected of her, she thanked them and wrote down in a notebook their names and what they had

brought. Eventually, two women adopted her and explained that all such gifts did have to be returned. It would be entirely inappropriate to simply accept three eggs from a neighbor and never bring anything back. One did not have to bring back eggs, but one should bring something back of approximately the same value. One could even bring money—there was nothing inappropriate in that—provided one did so at a discreet interval, and above all, that one did not bring the exact cost of the eggs. It had to be either a bit more or a bit less. To bring back nothing at all would be to cast oneself as an exploiter or a parasite. To bring back an exact equivalent would be to suggest that one no longer wishes to have anything to do with the neighbor. Tiv women, she learned, might spend a good part of the day walking for miles to distant homesteads to return a handful of okra or a tiny bit of change, “in an endless circle of gifts to which no one ever handed over the precise value of the object last received”—and in doing so, they were continually creating their society. There was certainly a trace of communism here—neighbors on good terms could also be trusted to help each other out in emergencies—but unlike communistic relations, which are assumed to be permanent, this sort of neighborliness had to be constantly created and maintained, because any link can be broken off at any time.

There are endless variations on this sort of tit-for-tat, or almost tit-for-tat, gift exchange. The most familiar is the exchange of presents: I buy someone a beer; they buy me the next one. Perfect equivalence implies equality. But consider a slightly more complicated example: I take a friend out to a fancy restaurant for dinner; after a discreet interval, they do the same. As anthropologists have long been in the habit of pointing out, the very existence of such customs—especially, the feeling that one really *ought* to return the favor—can’t be explained by standard economic theory, which assumes that any human interaction is ultimately a business deal and that we are all self-interested individuals trying to get the most for ourselves for the least cost or least amount of effort.²⁸ But this feeling is quite real, and it can cause genuine strain for those of limited means trying to keep up appearances. So: Why, if I took a free-market economic theorist out to an expensive dinner, would that economist feel somewhat diminished—uncomfortably in my debt—until he had been able to return the favor? Why, if he were feeling competitive with me, would he be inclined to take me to someplace even more expensive?

Recall the feasts and festivals alluded to above: here, too, there is a base of conviviality and playful (sometimes not so playful) competition. On the one hand, everyone’s pleasure is enhanced—after all, how many

people would really want to eat a superb meal at a French restaurant all alone? On the other, things can easily slip into games of one-upmanship—and hence obsession, humiliation, rage . . . or, as we'll soon see, even worse. In some societies, these games are formalized, but it's important to stress that such games only really develop between people or groups who perceive themselves to be more or less equivalent in status.²⁹ To return to our imaginary economist: it's not clear that he would feel diminished if he received a present, or was taken out to dinner, by just anyone. He would be most likely to feel this way if the benefactor were someone he felt was of roughly equivalent status or dignity: a colleague, for example. If Bill Gates or George Soros took him out to dinner, he would likely conclude that he had indeed received something for nothing and leave it at that. If some ingratiating junior colleague or eager graduate student did the same, he'd be likely to conclude that he was doing the man a favor just by accepting the invitation—if indeed he did accept, which he probably wouldn't.

This, too, appears to be the case wherever we find society divided into fine gradations of status and dignity. Pierre Bourdieu has described the “dialectic of challenge and riposte” that governs all games of honor among Kabyle Berber men in Algeria, in which the exchange of insults, attacks (in feud or battles), thefts, or threats was seen to follow exactly the same logic as the exchange of gifts.³⁰ To give a gift is both an honor and a provocation. To respond to one requires infinite artistry. Timing is all-important. So is making the counter-gift just different enough, but also just slightly grander. Above all is the tacit moral principle that one must always pick on someone one's own size. To challenge someone obviously older, richer, and more honorable is to risk being snubbed, and hence humiliated; to overwhelm a poor but respectable man with a gift he couldn't possibly pay back is simply cruel, and will do equal damage to your reputation. There's an Indonesian story about that too: about a rich man who sacrificed a magnificent ox to shame a penurious rival; the poor man utterly humiliated him, and won the contest, by calmly proceeding to sacrifice a chicken.³¹

Games like this become especially elaborate when status is to some degree up for grabs. When matters are *too* clear-cut, that introduces its own sorts of problems. Giving gifts to kings is often a particularly tricky and complicated business. The problem here is that one cannot really give a gift fit for a king (unless, perhaps, one is another king), since kings by definition already have everything. On the one hand, one is expected to make a reasonable effort:

Nasruddin was once called up to visit the king. A neighbor saw him hurrying along the road carrying a bag of turnips.

“What are those for?” he asked.

“I’ve been called to see the king. I thought it would be best to bring some kind of present.”

“You’re bringing him turnips? But turnips are peasant food! He’s a king! You should bring him something more appropriate, like grapes.”

Nasruddin agreed, and came to the king carrying a bunch of grapes. The king was not amused. “You’re giving me grapes? But I’m a king! This is ridiculous. Take this idiot out and teach him some manners! Throw each and every one of the grapes at him and then kick him out of the palace.”

The emperor’s guards dragged Nasruddin into a side room and began pelting him with grapes. As they did so, he fell on his knees and began crying, “Thank you, thank you God, for your infinite mercy!”

“Why are you thanking God?” they asked. “You’re being totally humiliated!”

Nasruddin replied, “Oh, I was just thinking, ‘Thank God I didn’t bring the turnips!’”

On the other hand, to give something that a king does not already have can get you in even greater trouble. One story circulating in the early Roman Empire concerned an inventor who, with great fanfare, presented a glass bowl as a gift to the emperor Tiberius. The emperor was puzzled: What was so impressive about a piece of glass? The man dropped it on the ground. Rather than shattering, it merely dented. He picked it up and simply pushed it back into its former shape.

“Did you tell anyone else how you made this thing?” asked a startled Tiberius.

The inventor assured him that he had not. The emperor therefore ordered him killed, since, if word of how to make unbreakable glass got out, his treasury of gold and silver would soon be worthless.³²

The best bet when dealing with kings was to make a reasonable effort to play the game, but one that is still bound to fail. The fourteenth-century Arab traveler Ibn Battuta tells of the customs of the King of Sind, a terrifying monarch who took a particular delight in displays of arbitrary power.³³ It was customary for foreign worthies visiting the king to present him with magnificent presents; whatever the gift was, he would invariably respond by presenting the bearer with something many times its value. As a result, a substantial business

developed where local bankers would lend money to such visitors to finance particularly spectacular gifts, knowing they could be well repaid from the proceeds of royal one-upmanship. The king must have known about this. He didn't object—since the whole point was to show that his wealth exceeded all possible equivalence—and if he really needed to, he could always expropriate the bankers. They knew that the really important game was not economic, but one of status, and his was absolute.

In exchange, the objects being traded are seen as equivalent. Therefore, by implication, so are the people: at least, at the moment when gift is met with counter-gift, or money changes hands; when there is no further debt or obligation and each of the two parties is equally free to walk away. This in turn implies autonomy. Both principles sit uncomfortably with monarchs, which is the reason that kings generally dislike any sort of exchange.³⁴ But within that overhanging prospect of potential cancellation, of ultimate equivalence, we find endless variations, endless games one can play. One can demand something from another person, knowing that by doing so, one is giving the other the right to demand something of equivalent value in return. In some contexts, even praising another's possession might be interpreted as a demand of this sort. In eighteenth-century New Zealand, English settlers soon learned that it was not a good idea to admire, say, a particularly beautiful jade pendant worn around the neck of a Maori warrior; the latter would inevitably insist on giving it, not take no for an answer, and then, after a discreet interval, return to praise the settler's coat or gun. The only way to head this off was to quickly give him a gift before he could ask for one. Sometimes gifts are offered in order for the giver to be able to make such a demand: if one accepts the present, one is tacitly agreeing to allow the giver to claim whatever he deems equivalent.³⁵

All this, in turn, can shade into something very much like barter, directly swapping one thing for another—which as we've seen does occur even in what Marcel Mauss liked to refer to as "gift economies," even if largely between strangers.³⁶ Within communities, there is almost always a reluctance, as the Tiv example so nicely illustrates, to allow things to cancel out—one reason that if there is money in common usage, people will often either refuse to use it with friends or relatives (which in a village society includes pretty much everyone), or alternately, like the Malagasy villagers in chapter 3, use it in radically different ways.

Hierarchy

Exchange, then, implies formal equality—or at least, the potential for it. This is precisely why kings have such trouble with it.

In contrast, relations of explicit hierarchy—that is, relations between at least two parties in which one is considered superior to the other—do not tend to operate by reciprocity at all. It's hard to see because the relation is often justified in reciprocal terms (“the peasants provide food, the lords provide protection”), but the principle by which they operate is exactly the opposite. In practice, hierarchy tends to work by a logic of precedent.

To illustrate what I mean by this, let us imagine a kind of continuum of one-sided social relations, ranging from the most exploitative to the most benevolent. At one extreme is theft, or plunder; on the other selfless charity.³⁷ Only at these two extremes is it possible to have material interactions between people who otherwise have no social relation of any kind. Only a lunatic would mug his next-door neighbor. A band of marauding soldiers or nomadic horsemen falling on a peasant hamlet to rape and pillage also obviously have no intention of forming any ongoing relations with the survivors. But in a similar way, religious traditions often insist that the only true charity is anonymous—in other words, not meant to place the recipient in one's debt. One extreme form of this, documented in various parts of the world, is the gift by stealth, in a kind of reverse burglary: to literally sneak into the recipient's house at night and plant one's present so no one can know for sure who has left it. The figure of Santa Claus, or Saint Nicholas (who, it must be remembered, was not just the patron saint of children, but also the patron saint of thieves) would appear to be the mythological version of the same principle: a benevolent burglar with whom no social relations are possible and therefore to whom no one could possibly owe anything, in his case, above all, because he does not actually exist.

Observe, however, what happens when one moves just a little bit less far out on the continuum in either direction. I have been told (I suspect it isn't true) that in parts of Belarus, gangs prey so systematically on travelers on trains and busses that they have developed the habit of giving each victim a little token, to confirm that the bearer has already been robbed. Obviously one step toward the creation of a state. Actually, one popular theory of the origins of the state, that goes back at least to the fourteenth-century North African historian Ibn Khaldun, runs precisely along these lines: nomadic raiders eventually

systematize their relations with sedentary villagers; pillage turns into tribute, rape turns into the “right of the first night” or the carrying off of likely candidates as recruits for the royal harem. Conquest, untrammelled force, becomes systematized, and thus framed not as a predatory relation but as a moral one, with the lords providing protection, and the villagers, their sustenance. But even if all parties assume they are operating by a shared moral code, that even kings cannot do whatever they want but must operate within limits, allowing peasants to argue about the rights and wrongs of just how much of their harvest a king’s retainers are entitled to carry off, they are very unlikely to frame their calculation in terms of the quality or quantity of protection provided, but rather in terms of custom and precedent: How much did we pay last year? How much did our ancestors have to pay? The same is true on the other side. If charitable donations become the basis for any sort of social relation, it will not be one based on reciprocity. If you give some coins to a panhandler, and that panhandler recognizes you later, it is unlikely that he will give you any money—but he might well consider you more likely to give him money again. Certainly this is true if one donates money to a charitable organization. (I gave money to the United Farm Workers once and I still haven’t heard the end of it.) Such an act of one-sided generosity is treated as a precedent for what will be expected afterward.³⁸ It’s quite the same if one gives candy to a child.

This is what I mean when I say that hierarchy operates by a principle that is the very opposite of reciprocity. Whenever the lines of superiority and inferiority are clearly drawn and accepted by all parties as the framework of a relationship, and relations are sufficiently ongoing that we are no longer simply dealing with arbitrary force, then relations will be seen as being regulated by a web of habit or custom. Sometimes the situation is assumed to have originated in some founding act of conquest. Or it might be seen as ancestral custom for which there is no need of explanation. But this introduces another complication to the problem of giving gifts to kings—or to any superior: there is always the danger that it will be treated as a precedent, added to the web of custom, and therefore considered obligatory thereafter. Xenophon claims that in the early days of the Persian Empire, each province vied to send the Great King gifts of its most unique and valuable products. This became the basis of the tribute system: each province was eventually expected to provide the same “gifts” every year.³⁹ Similarly, according to the great Medieval historian Marc Bloch:

[I]n the ninth century, when one day there was a shortage of wine in the royal cellars at Ver, the monks of Saint-Denis were

asked to supply the two hundred hogs-heads required. This contribution was thenceforth claimed from them as of right every year, and it required an imperial charter to abolish it. At Ardres, we are told, there was once a bear, the property of the local lord. The inhabitants, who loved to watch it fight with dogs, undertook to feed it. The beast eventually died, but the lord continued to exact the loaves of bread.”⁴⁰

In other words, any gift to a feudal superior, “especially if repeated three or four times,” was likely to be treated as a precedent and added to the web of custom. As a result, those giving gifts to superiors often insisted on receiving a “letter of non-prejudice” legally stipulating that such a gift would not be required in the future. While it is unusual for matters to become quite so formalized, any social relation that is assumed from the start to be unequal will inevitably begin to operate on an analogous logic—if only because, once relations are seen as based on “custom,” the only way to demonstrate that one has a duty or obligation to do something is to show that one has done it before.

Often, such arrangements can turn into a logic of caste: certain clans are responsible for weaving the ceremonial garments, or bringing the fish for royal feasts, or cutting the king’s hair. They thus come to be known as weavers or fishermen or barbers.⁴¹ This last point can’t be overemphasized because it brings home another truth regularly overlooked: that the logic of identity is, always and everywhere, entangled in the logic of hierarchy. It is only when certain people are placed above others, or where everyone is being ranked in relation to the king, or the high priest, or Founding Fathers, that one begins to speak of people bound by their essential nature: about fundamentally different kinds of human being. Ideologies of caste or race are just extreme examples. It happens whenever one group is seen as raising themselves above others, or placing themselves below others, in such a way that ordinary standards of fair dealing no longer apply.

In fact, something like this happens in a small way even in our most intimate social relations. The moment we recognize someone as a different *sort* of person, either above or below us, then ordinary rules of reciprocity become modified or are set aside. If a friend is unusually generous once, we will likely wish to reciprocate. If she acts this way repeatedly, we conclude she is a generous person, and are hence less likely to reciprocate.⁴²

We can describe a simple formula here: a certain action, repeated, becomes customary; as a result, it comes to define the actor’s essential nature. Alternately, a person’s nature may be defined by how others

have acted toward him in the past. To be an aristocrat is largely to insist that in the past, others have *treated* you as an aristocrat (since aristocrats don't really do anything in particular, most spend their time simply existing in some sort of putatively superior state), and therefore should continue to do so. Much of the art of being such a person is that of treating oneself in such a manner that it conveys how you expect others to treat you: in the case of actual kings, covering oneself with gold so as to suggest that others do likewise. On the other end of the scale, this is also how abuse becomes self-legitimizing. As a former student of mine, Sarah Stillman, pointed out: in the United States, if a middle-class thirteen-year-old girl is kidnapped, raped, and killed, it is considered an agonizing national crisis that everyone with a television is expected to follow for several weeks. If a thirteen-year-old girl is turned out as a child prostitute, raped systematically for years, and ultimately killed, all this is considered unremarkable—really just the sort of thing one can expect to end up happening to someone like that.⁴³

When objects of material wealth pass back and forth between superiors and inferiors as gifts or payments, the key principle seems to be that the sorts of things given on each side should be considered fundamentally different in quality, their relative value impossible to quantify—the result being that there is no way to even conceive of a squaring of accounts. Even if Medieval writers insisted on imagining society as a hierarchy in which priests pray for everyone, nobles fight for everyone, and peasants feed everyone, it never even occurred to anyone to establish how many prayers or how much military protection was equivalent to a ton of wheat. Nor did anyone ever consider making such a calculation. Neither is it that “lowly” sorts of people are necessarily given lowly sorts of things and vice versa. Sometimes it is quite the opposite. Until recently, just about any notable philosopher, artist, poet, or musician was required to find a wealthy patron for support. Famous works of poetry or philosophy are often prefaced—oddly, to the modern eye—with gushing, sycophantic praise for the wisdom and virtue of some long-forgotten earl or count who provided a meager stipend. The fact that the noble patron merely provided room and board, or money, and that the client showed his gratitude by painting the *Mona Lisa*, or composing the *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, was in no way seen to compromise the assumption of the noble's intrinsic superiority.

There is one great exception to this principle, and that is the phenomenon of hierarchical redistribution. Here, though, rather than giving back and forth the same sorts of things, they give back and forth

exactly the same thing: as, for instance, when fans of certain Nigerian pop stars throw money onto the stage during concerts, and the pop stars in question make occasional tours of their fans' neighborhoods tossing (the same) money from the windows of their limos. When this is all that's going on, we may speak of an absolutely minimal sort of hierarchy. In much of Papua New Guinea, social life centers on "big men," charismatic individuals who spend much of their time coaxing, cajoling, and manipulating in order to acquire masses of wealth to give away again at some great feast. One could, in practice, pass from here to, say, an Amazonian or indigenous North American chief. Unlike big men, their role is more formalized; but actually such chiefs have no power to compel anyone to do anything they don't want to (hence North American Indian chiefs' famous skill at oratory and powers of persuasion). As a result, they tended to give away far more than they received. Observers often remarked that in terms of personal possessions, a village chief was often the poorest man in the village, such was the pressure on him for constant supply of largesse.

Indeed, one could judge how egalitarian a society really was by exactly this: whether those ostensibly in positions of authority are merely conduits for redistribution, or able to use their positions to accumulate riches. The latter seems most likely in aristocratic societies that add another element: war and plunder. After all, just about anyone who comes into a very large amount of wealth will ultimately give at least part of it away—often in grandiose and spectacular ways to large numbers of people. The more of one's wealth is obtained by plunder or extortion, the more spectacular and self-aggrandizing will be the forms in which it's given away.⁴⁴ And what is true of warrior aristocracies is all the more true of ancient states, where rulers almost invariably represented themselves as the protectors of the helpless, supporters of widows and orphans, and champions of the poor. The genealogy of the modern redistributive state—with its notorious tendency to foster identity politics—can be traced back not to any sort of "primitive communism" but ultimately to violence and war.

Shifting between Modalities

I should underline again that we are not talking about different types of society here (as we've seen, the very idea that we've ever been organized into discrete "societies" is dubious) but moral principles that always coexist everywhere. We are all communists with our closest

friends, and feudal lords when dealing with small children. It is very hard to imagine a society where people wouldn't be both.

The obvious question is: If we are all ordinarily moving back and forth between completely different systems of moral accounting, why hasn't anybody noticed this? Why, instead, do we continually feel the need to reframe everything in terms of reciprocity?

Here we must return to the fact that reciprocity is our main way of imagining justice. In particular, it is what we fall back on when we're thinking in the abstract, and especially when we're trying to create an idealized picture of society. I've already given examples of this sort of thing. Iroquois communities were based on an ethos that required everyone to be attentive to the needs of several different sorts of people: their friends, their families, members of their matrilineal clans, even friendly strangers in situations of hardship. It was when they had to think about society in the abstract that they started to emphasize the two sides of the village, each of which had to bury the other's dead. It was a way of imagining communism through reciprocity. Similarly, feudalism was a notoriously messy and complicated business, but whenever Medieval thinkers generalized about it, they reduced all its ranks and orders into one simple formula in which each order contributed its share: "Some pray, some fight, still others work."⁴⁵ Even hierarchy was seen as ultimately reciprocal, despite this formula having nothing to do with the real relations between priests, knights, and peasants really operated on the ground. Anthropologists are familiar with the phenomenon: it's only when people who have never had occasion to really think about their society or culture as a whole, who probably weren't even aware they were living inside something other people considered a "society" or a "culture," are asked to explain how everything works that they say things like "this is how we repay our mothers for the pain of having raised us," or puzzle over conceptual diagrams in which clan A gives their women in marriage to clan B who gives theirs to clan C, who gives theirs back to A again, but which never seem to quite correspond to what real people actually do.⁴⁶ When trying to imagine a just society, it's hard not to evoke images of balance and symmetry, of elegant geometries where everything balances out.

The idea that there is something called "the market" is not so very different. Economists will often admit this, if you ask them in the right way. Markets aren't real. They are mathematical models, created by imagining a self-contained world where everyone has exactly the same motivation and the same knowledge and is engaging in the same self-interested calculating exchange. Economists are aware that reality is always more complicated; but they are also aware that to come up with

a mathematical model, one always has to make the world into a bit of a cartoon. There's nothing wrong with this. The problem comes when it enables some (often these same economists) to declare that anyone who ignores the dictates of the market shall surely be punished—or that since we live in a market system, everything (except government interference) is based on principles of justice: that our economic system is one vast network of reciprocal relations in which, in the end, the accounts balance and all debts are paid.

These principles get tangled up in each other and it's thus often difficult to tell which predominates in a given situation—one reason that it's ridiculous to pretend we could ever reduce human behavior, economic or otherwise, to a mathematical formula of any sort. Still, this means that some degree of reciprocity can be detected as potentially present in any situation; so a determined observer can always find some excuse to say it's there. What's more, certain principles appear to have an inherent tendency to slip into others. For instance, a lot of extremely hierarchical relationships can operate (at least some of the time) on communistic principles. If you have a rich patron, you come to him in times of need, and he is expected to help you. But only to a certain degree. No one expects the patron to provide so much help that it threatens to undermine the underlying inequality.⁴⁷

Likewise, communistic relations can easily start slipping into relations of hierarchical inequality—often without anyone noticing it. It's not hard to see why this happens. Sometimes different people's "abilities" and "needs" are grossly disproportionate. Genuinely egalitarian societies are keenly aware of this and tend to develop elaborate safeguards around the dangers of anyone—say, especially good hunters, in a hunting society—rising too far above themselves; just as they tend to be suspicious of anything that might make one member of the society feel in genuine debt to another. A member who draws attention to his own accomplishments will find himself the object of mockery. Often, the only polite thing to do if one has accomplished something significant is to instead make fun of oneself. The Danish writer Peter Freuchen, in his *Book of the Eskimo*, described how in Greenland, one could tell what a fine delicacy someone had to offer his guests by how much he belittled it beforehand:

The old man laughed. "Some people don't know much. I am such a poor hunter and my wife a terrible cook who ruins everything. I don't have much, but I think there is a piece of meat outside. It might still be there as the dogs have refused it several times."

This was such a recommendation in the Eskimo way of backwards bragging that everyone's mouths began to water . . .

The reader will recall the walrus hunter of the last chapter, who took offense when the author tried to thank him for giving him a share of meat—after all, humans help one another, and once we treat something as a gift, we turn into something less than human: “Up here we say that by gifts one makes slaves and by whips one makes dogs.”⁴⁸

“Gift” here does *not* mean something given freely, not mutual aid that we can ordinarily expect human beings to provide to one another. To thank someone suggests that he or she might *not* have acted that way, and that therefore the choice to act this way creates an obligation, a sense of debt—and hence, inferiority. Communes or egalitarian collectives in the United States often face similar dilemmas, and they have to come up with their own safeguards against creeping hierarchy. It's not that the tendency for communism to slip into hierarchy is inevitable—societies like the Inuit have managed to fend it off for thousands of years—but rather, that one must always guard against it.

In contrast, it's notoriously difficult—often downright impossible—to shift relations based on an assumption of communistic sharing to relations of equal exchange. We observe this all the time with friends: if someone is seen as taking advantage of your generosity, it's often much easier to break off relations entirely than to demand that they somehow pay you back. One extreme example is the Maori story about a notorious glutton who used to irritate fishermen up and down the coast near where he lived by constantly asking for the best portions of their catch. Since to refuse a direct request for food was effectively impossible, they would dutifully turn it over; until one day, people decided enough was enough and killed him.⁴⁹

We've already seen how creating a ground of sociability among strangers can often require an elaborate process of testing the others' limits by helping oneself to their possessions. The same sort of thing can happen in peacemaking, or even in the creation of business partnerships.⁵⁰ In Madagascar, people told me that two men who are thinking of going into business together will often become blood brothers. Blood brotherhood, *fatidra*, consists of an unlimited promise of mutual aid. Both parties solemnly swear that they will never refuse any request from the other. In reality, partners to such an agreement are usually fairly circumspect in what they actually request. But, my friends insisted, when people first make such an agreement, they sometimes like to test it out. One may demand the other's house, the shirt off his back, or (everyone's favorite example) the right to spend the night

with his wife. The only limit is the knowledge that anything one can demand, the other one can too.⁵¹ Here, again, we are talking about an initial establishment of trust. Once the genuineness of the mutual commitment has been confirmed, the ground is prepared, as it were, and the two men can begin to buy and sell on consignment, advance funds, share profits, and otherwise trust that each will look after the other's commercial interests from then on. The most famous and dramatic moments, however, are those when relations of exchange threaten to break down into hierarchy: that is, when two parties are acting like equals, trading gifts, or blows, or commodities, or anything else, but one of them does something that completely flips the scale.

I've already mentioned the tendency of gift exchange to turn into games of one-upmanship, and how in some societies this potential is formalized in great public contests. This is typical, above all, of what are often called "heroic societies": those in which governments are weak or nonexistent and society is organized instead around warrior noblemen, each with his entourage of loyal retainers and tied to the others by ever-shifting alliances and rivalries. Most epic poetry—from the *Iliad* to the *Mahabharata* to *Beowulf*—harkens back to this sort of world, and anthropologists have discovered similar arrangements among the Maori of New Zealand and the Kwakiutl, Tlingit, and Haida of the American Northwest coast. In heroic societies, the throwing of feasts and resulting contests of generosity are often spoken of as mere extensions of war: "fighting with property" or "fighting with food." Those who throw such feasts often indulge in colorful speeches about how their enemies are thus crushed and destroyed by glorious feats of generosity aimed in their direction (Kwakiutl chiefs liked to speak of themselves as great mountains from which gifts rolled like giant boulders), and of how conquered rivals are thus reduced—much as in the Inuit metaphor—to slaves.

Such statements are not to be taken literally—another feature of such societies is a highly developed art of boasting.⁵² Heroic chiefs and warriors tended to talk themselves up just as consistently as those in egalitarian societies talked themselves down. It's not as if someone who loses out in a contest of gift exchange is ever actually reduced to slavery, but he might end up feeling as if he were. And the consequences could be catastrophic. One ancient Greek source describes Celtic festivals where rival nobles would alternate between jousts and contests of generosity, presenting their enemies with magnificent gold and silver treasures. Occasionally this could lead to a kind of checkmate; someone would be faced with a present so magnificent that he could not possibly match it. In this case, the only honorable response was for him

to cut his own throat, thus allowing his wealth to be distributed to his followers.⁵³ Six hundred years later, we find a case from an Icelandic saga of an aging Viking named Egil, who befriended a younger man named Einar, who was still actively raiding. They liked to sit together composing poetry. One day Einar came by a magnificent shield “inscribed with old tales; and between the writing were overlaid spangles of gold with precious stones.” No one had ever seen anything like it. He took it with him on a visit to Egil. Egil was not at home, so Einar waited three days, as was the custom, then hung the shield as a present in the mead-hall and rode off.

Egil returned home, saw the shield, and asked who owned such a treasure. He was told that Einar had visited and given it to him. Then Egil said, “To hell with him! Does he think I’m going to stay up all night and compose a poem about his shield? Get my horse, I’m going to ride after him and kill him.” As Einar’s luck would have it he had left early enough to put sufficient distance between himself and Egil. So Egil resigned himself to composing a poem about Einar’s gift.⁵⁴



Competitive gift exchange, then, does not literally render anyone slaves; it is simply an affair of honor. These are people, however, for whom honor is everything.

The main reason that being unable to pay a debt, especially a debt of honor, was such a crisis was because this *was* how noblemen assembled their entourages. The law of hospitality in the ancient world, for instance, insisted that any traveler must be fed, given shelter, and treated as an honored guest—but only for a certain length of time. If a guest did not go away, he would eventually become a mere subordinate. The role of such hangers-on has been largely neglected by students of human history. In many periods—from imperial Rome to medieval China—probably the most important relationships, at least in towns and cities, were those of patronage. Anyone rich and important would find himself surrounded by flunkies, sycophants, perpetual dinner guests, and other sorts of willing dependents. Drama and poetry of the time are full of such characters.⁵⁵ Similarly, for much of human history, being respectable and middle-class meant spending one’s mornings going from door to door, paying one’s respects to important local patrons. To this day, informal patronage systems still crop up, whenever relatively rich and powerful people feel the need to assemble

networks of supporters—a practice well documented in many parts of the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Latin America. Such relationships seem to consist of a slapdash mix of all three principles that I've been mapping out over the course of this chapter; nevertheless, those observing them insist on trying to cast them in the language of exchange and debt.

A final example: in a collection called *Gifts and Spoils*, published in 1971, we find a brief essay by the anthropologist Lorraine Blaxter about a rural department in the French Pyrenees, most of whose inhabitants are farmers. Everyone places a great emphasis on the importance of mutual aid—the local phrase means “giving service” (*rendre service*). People living in the same community should look out for one another and pitch in when their neighbors are having trouble. This is the essence of communal morality, in fact, it's how one knows that any sort of community exists. So far so good. However, she notes, when someone does a particularly great favor, mutual aid can turn into something else:

If a man in a factory went to the boss and asked for a job, and the boss found him one, this would be an example of someone giving service. The man who got the job could never repay the boss, but he could show him respect, or perhaps give him symbolic gifts of garden produce. If a gift demands a return, and no tangible return is possible, the repayment will be through support or esteem.⁵⁶

Thus does mutual aid slip into inequality. Thus do patron-client relations come into being. We have already observed this. I chose this particular passage because the author's phrasing is so weird. It completely contradicts itself. The boss does the man a favor. The man cannot repay the favor. Therefore, the man repays the favor by showing up at the boss's house with the occasional basket of tomatoes and showing him respect. So which one is it? Can he repay the favor, or not?

Peter Freuchen's walrus hunter would, no doubt, think he knew exactly what was going on here. Bringing the basket of tomatoes was simply the equivalent of saying “Thank you.” It was a way of acknowledging that one owes a debt of gratitude, that gifts had in fact made slaves just as whips make dogs. The boss and the employee are now fundamentally different sorts of people. The problem is that in all other respects, they are not fundamentally different sorts of people. Most likely they are both middle-aged Frenchmen, fathers of families,

citizens of the Republic with similar tastes in music, sports, and food. They *ought* to be equals. As a result, even the tomatoes, which are really a token of recognition of the existence of a debt that can never be repaid, has to be represented as if it was itself a kind of repayment—an interest payment on a loan that could, everyone agrees to pretend, someday be paid back, thus returning the two members to their proper equal status once again.⁵⁷

(It's telling that the favor is finding the client a job in a factory, because what happens is not very different from what happens when you get a job in a factory to begin with. A wage-labor contract is, ostensibly, a free contract between equals—but an agreement between equals in which both agree that once one of them punches the time clock, they won't be equals any more.⁵⁸ The law does recognize a bit of a problem here; that's why it insists that you cannot sell off your equality permanently [you are not free to sell yourself into slavery]. Such arrangements are only acceptable if the boss's power is not absolute, if it is limited to work time, and if you have the legal right to break off the contract and thereby to restore yourself to full equality, at any time.)

It seems to me that this agreement between equals to no longer be equal (at least for a time) is critically important. It is the very essence of what we call “debt.”



What, then, is debt?

Debt is a very specific thing, and it arises from very specific situations. It first requires a relationship between two people who do not consider each other fundamentally different sorts of being, who are at least potential equals, who *are* equals in those ways that are really important, and who are not currently in a state of equality—but for whom there is some way to set matters straight.

In the case of gift-giving, as we've seen, this requires a certain equality of status. That's why our economics professor didn't feel any sense of obligation—any debt of honor—if taken out to dinner by someone who ranked either much higher or much lower than himself. With money loans, all that is required is that the two parties be of equal legal standing. (You can't lend money to a child, or to a lunatic. Well, you can, but the courts won't help you get it back.) Legal—rather than moral—debts have other unique qualities. For instance, they can be forgiven, which isn't always possible with a moral debt.

This means that there is no such thing as a genuinely unpayable debt. If there was no conceivable way to salvage the situation, we

wouldn't be calling it a "debt." Even the French villager could, conceivably, save his patron's life, or win the lottery and buy the factory. Even when we speak of a criminal "paying his debt to society," we are saying that he has done something so terrible that he has now been banished from that equal status under the law that belongs by natural right to any citizen of his country; however, we call it a "debt" because it *can* be paid, equality *can* be restored, even if the cost may be death by lethal injection.

During the time that the debt remains unpaid, the logic of hierarchy takes hold. There is no reciprocity. As anyone who has ever been in jail knows, the first thing the jailors communicate is that nothing that happens in jail has anything to do with justice. Similarly, debtor and creditor confront each other like a peasant before a feudal lord. The law of precedent takes hold. If you bring your creditor tomatoes from the garden, it never occurs to you that he would give something back. He might expect you to do it again, though. But always there is the assumption that the situation is somewhat unnatural, because the debt really ought to be paid.

This is what makes situations of effectively unpayable debt so difficult and so painful. Since creditor and debtor are ultimately equals, if the debtor cannot do what it takes to restore herself to equality, there is obviously something wrong with her; it must be her fault.

This connection becomes clear if we look at the etymology of common words for "debt" in European languages. Many are synonyms for "fault," "sin," or "guilt;" just as a criminal owes a debt to society, a debtor is always a sort of criminal.⁵⁹ In ancient Crete, according to Plutarch, it was the custom for those taking loans to pretend to snatch the money from the lender's purse. Why, he wondered? Probably "so that, if they default, they could be charged with violence and punished all the more."⁶⁰ This is why in so many periods of history insolvent debtors could be jailed, or even—as in early Republican Rome—executed.

A debt, then, is just an exchange that has not been brought to completion.

It follows that debt is strictly a creature of reciprocity and has little to do with other sorts of morality (communism, with its needs and abilities; hierarchy, with its customs and qualities). True, if we were really determined, we could argue (as some do) that communism is a condition of permanent mutual indebtedness, or that hierarchy is constructed out of unpayable debts. But isn't this just the same old story, starting from the assumption that all human interactions must be, by definition, forms of exchange, and then performing whatever mental somersaults are required to prove it?

No. All human interactions are not forms of exchange. Only some are. Exchange encourages a particular way of conceiving human relations. This is because exchange implies equality, but it also implies separation. It's precisely when the money changes hands, when the debt is cancelled, that equality is restored *and* both parties can walk away and have nothing further to do with each other.

Debt is what happens in between: when the two parties cannot yet walk away from each other, because they are not yet equal. But it is carried out in the shadow of eventual equality. Because achieving that equality, however, destroys the very reason for having a relationship, just about everything interesting happens in between.⁶¹ In fact, just about everything human happens in between—even if this means that all such human relations bear with them at least a tiny element of criminality, guilt, or shame.

For the Tiv women whom I mentioned earlier in the chapter, this wasn't much of a problem. By ensuring that everyone was always slightly in debt to one another, they actually created human society, if a very fragile sort of society—a delicate web made up of obligations to return three eggs or a bag of okra, ties renewed and recreated, as any one of them could be cancelled out at any time.

Our own habits of civility are not so very different. Consider the custom, in American society, of constantly saying “please” and “thank you.” To do so is often treated as basic morality: we are constantly chiding children for forgetting to do it, just as the moral guardians of our society—teachers and ministers, for instance—do to everybody else. We often assume that the habit is universal, but as the Inuit hunter made clear, it is not.⁶² Like so many of our everyday courtesies, it is a kind of democratization of what was once a habit of feudal deference: the insistence on treating absolutely everyone the way that one used only to have to treat a lord or similar hierarchical superior.

Perhaps this is not so in every case. Imagine we are on a crowded bus, looking for a seat. A fellow passenger moves her bag aside to clear one; we smile, or nod, or make some other little gesture of acknowledgment. Or perhaps we actually say “Thank you.” Such a gesture is simply a recognition of common humanity: we are acknowledging that the woman who had been blocking the seat is not a mere physical obstacle but a human being, and that we feel genuine gratitude toward someone we will likely never see again. None of this is generally true when one asks someone across the table to “please pass the salt,” or when the postman thanks you for signing for a delivery. We think of these simultaneously as meaningless formalities and as the very moral basis of society. Their apparent unimportance can be measured by the

fact that almost no one would refuse, on principle, to say “please” or “thank you” in just about any situation—even those who might find it almost impossible to say “I’m sorry” or “I apologize.”

In fact, the English “please” is short for “if you please,” “if it pleases you to do this”—it is the same in most European languages (French *si il vous plait*, Spanish *por favor*). Its literal meaning is “you are under no obligation to do this.” “Hand me the salt. Not that I am saying that you have to!” This is not true; there is a social obligation, and it would be almost impossible not to comply. But etiquette largely consists of the exchange of polite fictions (to use less polite language, lies). When you ask someone to pass the salt, you are also giving them an order; by attaching the word “please,” you are saying that it is not an order. But, in fact, it is.

In English, “thank you” derives from “think,” it originally meant, “I will remember what you did for me”—which is usually not true either—but in other languages (the Portuguese *obrigado* is a good example) the standard term follows the form of the English “much obliged”—it actually does mean “I am in your debt.” The French *merci* is even more graphic: it derives from “mercy,” as in begging for mercy; by saying it you are symbolically placing yourself in your benefactor’s power—since a debtor is, after all, a criminal.⁶³ Saying “you’re welcome,” or “it’s nothing” (French *de rien*, Spanish *de nada*)—the latter has at least the advantage of often being literally true—is a way of reassuring the one to whom one has passed the salt that you are not actually inscribing a debit in your imaginary moral account book. So is saying “my pleasure”—you are saying, “No, actually, it’s a credit, not a debit—you did *me* a favor because in asking me to pass the salt, you gave me the opportunity to do something I found rewarding in itself!”⁶⁴

Decoding the tacit calculus of debt (“I owe you one,” “No, you don’t owe me anything,” “Actually, if anything, it’s me who owes you,” as if inscribing and then scratching off so many infinitesimal entries in an endless ledger) makes it easy to understand why this sort of thing is often viewed not as the quintessence of morality, but as the quintessence of *middle-class* morality. True, by now middle-class sensibilities dominate society. But there are still those who find the practice odd. Those at the very top of society often still feel that deference is owed primarily to hierarchical superiors and find it slightly idiotic to watch postmen and pastry cooks taking turns pretending to treat each other like little feudal lords. At the other extreme, those who grew up in what in Europe are called “popular” environments—small towns, poor neighborhoods, anyplace where there is still an assumption that people who are not enemies will, ordinarily, take care of one another—will

often find it insulting to be constantly told, in effect, that there is some chance they might *not* do their job as a waiter or taxi driver correctly, or provide houseguests with tea. In other words, middle-class etiquette insists that we are all equals, but it does so in a very particular way. On the one hand, it pretends that nobody is giving anybody orders (think here of the burly security guard at the mall who appears before someone walking into a restricted area and says, “Can I help you?”); on the other, it treats every gesture of what I’ve been calling “baseline communism” as if it were really a form of exchange. As a result, like Tiv neighborhoods, middle-class society has to be endlessly recreated, as a kind of constant flickering game of shadows, the criss-crossing of an infinity of momentary debt relations, each one almost instantly cancelled out.

All of this is a relatively recent innovation. The habit of always saying “please” and “thank you” first began to take hold during the commercial revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—among those very middle classes who were largely responsible for it. It is the language of bureaus, shops, and offices, and over the course of the last five hundred years it has spread across the world along with them. It is also merely one token of a much larger philosophy, a set of assumptions of what humans are and what they owe one another, that have by now become so deeply ingrained that we cannot see them.



Sometimes, at the brink of a new historical era, some prescient soul can see the full implications of what is beginning to happen—sometimes in a way that later generations can’t. Let me end with a text by such a person. In Paris, sometime in 1540s, François Rabelais—lapsed monk, doctor, legal scholar—composed what was to become a famous mock eulogy, which he inserted in the third book of his great *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and which came to be known as “In Praise of Debt.”

Rabelais places the encomium in the mouth of one Panurge, a wandering scholar and man of extreme classical erudition who, he observes, “knew sixty-three ways of making money—the most honorable and most routine of which was stealing.”⁶⁵ The good-natured giant Pantagruel adopts Panurge and even provides him with a respectable income, but it bothers him that Panurge continues to spend money like water and remains up to his ears in debt. Wouldn’t it be better, Pantagruel suggests, to be able to pay his creditors?

Panurge responds with horror: “God forbid that I should ever be out of debt!” Debt is, in fact, the very basis of his philosophy:

Always owe somebody something, then he will be forever praying God to grant you a good, long and blessed life. Fearing to lose what you owe him, he will always be saying good things about you in every sort of company; he will be constantly acquiring new lenders for you, so that you can borrow to pay him back, filling his ditch with other men's spoil.⁶⁶

Above all else, they will always be praying that you come into money. It's like those ancient slaves destined to be sacrificed at their masters' funerals. When they wished their master long life and good health, they genuinely meant it! What's more, debt can make you into a kind of god, who can make something (money, well-wishing creditors) out of absolutely nothing.

Worse still: I give myself to bonnie Saint Bobelin if all my life I have not reckoned debts to be, as it were, a connection and colligation between Heaven and Earth (uniquely preserving the lineage of Man without which, I say, all human beings would soon perish) and perhaps to be that great World Soul which, according to the Academics, gives life to all things.

That it really is so, evoke tranquilly in your mind the Idea and Form of a world—take if you like the thirtieth of the worlds imagined by Metrodorus—in which there were no debtors or lenders at all. A universe sans debts! Amongst the heavenly bodies there would be no regular course whatsoever: all would be in disarray. Jupiter, reckoning that he owed no debt to Saturn, would dispossess him of his sphere, and with his Homeric chain hold in suspension all the Intelligences, gods, heavens, daemons, geniuses, heroes, devils, earth, sea and all the elements . . . The Moon would remain dark and bloody; why should the Sun share his light with her? He is under no obligation. The Sun would never shine on their Earth; the heavenly bodies would pour no good influences down upon it.

Between the elements there will be no mutual sharing of qualities, no alternation, no transmutation whatsoever, one will not think itself obliged to the other; it has lent it nothing. From earth no longer will water be made, nor water transmuted into air; from air fire will not be made, and fire will not warm the earth. Earth will bring forth nothing but monsters, Titans, giants. The rain will not rain, the light will shed no light, the wind will not blow, and there will be no summer, no autumn, Lucifer will tear off his bonds and, sallying forth from deepest Hell with the Furies, the Vengeances and the horned

devils, will seek to turf the gods of both the greater and lesser nations out from their nests in the heavens.

And what's more, if human beings owed nothing to one another, life would "be no better than a dog-fight"—a mere unruly brawl.

Amongst human beings none will save another; it will be no good a man shouting Help! Fire! I'm drowning! Murder! Nobody will come and help him. Why? Because he has lent nothing: and no one owes him anything. No one has anything to lose by his fire, his shipwreck, his fall, or his death. He has lent nothing. And: he would lend nothing either hereafter.

In short, Faith, Hope and Charity would be banished from this world.

Panurge—a man without a family, alone, whose entire calling in life was getting large amounts of money and then spending it—serves as a fitting prophet for the world that was just beginning to emerge. His perspective of course is that of a *wealthy* debtor—not one liable to be trundled off to some pestiferous dungeon for failure to pay. Still, what he is describing is the logical conclusion, the *reductio ad absurdum*, which Rabelais as always lays out with cheerful perversity, of the assumptions about the world as exchange slumbering behind all our pleasant bourgeois formalities (which Rabelais himself, incidentally, detested—the book is basically a mixture of classical erudition and dirty jokes).

And what he says is true. If we insist on defining all human interactions as matters of people giving one thing for another, then any ongoing human relations can only take the form of debts. Without them, no one would owe anything to anybody. A world without debt would revert to primordial chaos, a war of all against all; no one would feel the slightest responsibility for one another; the simple fact of being human would have no significance; we would all become isolated planets who couldn't even be counted on to maintain our proper orbits.

Pantagruel will have none of it. His own feelings on the matter, he says, can be summed up with one line from the Apostle Paul: "Owe no man anything, save mutual love and affection."⁶⁷ Then, in an appropriately biblical gesture, he declares, "From your past debts I shall free you."

"What can I do but thank you?" Panurge replies.

brother charges another” (op cit). In ancient Greece, friendly loans between social equals were known as *eranos* loans, usually of sums raised by an impromptu mutual-aid society and not involving the payment of interest (Jones 1956:171–73; Vondeling 1961; Finley 1981:67–68; Millet 1991:153–155). Aristocrats often made such loans to one another, but so did groups of slaves trying to pool money to buy back their freedom (Harrill 1998:167). This tendency, for mutual aid to be most marked at the very top and very bottom of the social scale is a consistent pattern to this day.

31. Hence the constant invocation of the phrase “your brother,” particularly in Deuteronomy, e.g., “you shall not lend at interest to your brother” (23:20).

Chapter Five

1. As we’ll see in chapter seven, Plato begins *The Republic* in exactly the same way.

2. For a polite but devastating assessment, see Kahneman 2003.

3. Homans 1958, also Blau 1964; Levi-Strauss 1963:296. In anthropology, the first to propose reciprocity as a universal principle was Richard Thurnwald (1916), but it was made famous by Malinowski (1922).

4. One reason no known law code has ever been known to enforce the principle; the penalty was always there to be commuted to something else.

5. Atwood (2008:1). The author then proceeds to explore the nature of our sense of economic morality by comparing the behavior of caged apes with middle-class Canadian children to argue that all human relations are indeed either exchange or forcible appropriation (ibid:49). Despite the brilliance of many of its arguments, the result is a rather sad testimony to how difficult it is for the scions of the North Atlantic professional classes not to

see their own characteristic ways of imagining the world as simple human nature.

6. Seton’s father, a failed shipping magnate turned accountant, was, Seton later wrote, so cold and abusive that his son spent much of his youth in the woods trying to avoid him; after paying the debt—which incidentally came to \$537.50, a tidy but not insurmountable sum in 1881—he changed his name and spent much of the rest of his life trying to develop more healthy child-rearing techniques.

7. Rev. W.H. Beatley in Levy-Bruhl 1923:411

8. Rev. Fr. Bulléon, in Levy-Bruhl 1923:425

9. This phrase was not coined by Marx, incidentally, but was apparently a slogan current in the early French workers’ movement, first appearing in print in the work of socialist Louis Blanc in 1839. Marx only took up the phrase in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in 1875, and even then used it in a rather idiosyncratic way: for the principle he imagined could apply on the level of society as a whole once technology had reached the point of guaranteeing absolute material abundance. For Marx, “communism” was both the political movement aiming to bring about such a future society, and that society itself. I am drawing here more on the alternate strain of revolutionary theory, evident most famously perhaps in Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* (1902).

10. At least, unless there is some specific reason not to—for instance, a hierarchical division of labor that says some people get coffee and others do not.

11. What this means of course is that command economies—putting government bureaucracies in charge of coordinating every aspect of the production and distribution of goods and services within a given national territory—tends to be much less efficient than other available alternatives. This is obviously true, though if it “just doesn’t work” at all, it’s hard to imagine how states like the Soviet Union could have existed, let alone maintain

themselves as world powers, in the first place.

12. Evans-Pritchard 1940:182

13. Similarly, a middle-class pedestrian would be unlikely to ask a gang member for directions, and might even run in fear if one approached him to ask for the time, but this is again because of an assumption of a tacit state of war existing between them.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

15. Richards 1939:197. Max Gluckman, remarking on such customs, concludes that insofar as it is possible to speak of “primitive communism,” it exists in consumption, rather than production, which tends to be much more individually organized (1971:52).

16. A typical example: “if a cabin of hungry people meets another whose provisions are not entirely exhausted, the latter share with the newcomers the little which remains to them without waiting to be asked, although they expose themselves thereby to the same danger of perishing as those whom they help . . .” Lafitau 1974 Volume II:61.

17. *Jesuit Relations* (1635) 8:127, cited in Delâge 1993:54.

18. This is a common arrangement in certain parts of the world (particularly the Andes, Amazonia, insular Southeast Asia, and Melanesia), and invariably there is some rule whereby each half is dependent on the other for something considered essential to human life. One can only marry someone from the other side of the village, or maybe one can only eat pigs raised on the other side, or perhaps one side needs people from the other side to sponsor the rituals that initiate its male children into manhood.

19. As I have suggested elsewhere, Graeber 2001:159–60; cf. Mauss 1947:104–5.

20. I’m side-stepping the whole question of one-sided examples discussed in Graeber 2001:218.

21. Marshall Sahlins (1972) coined the phrase “generalized reciprocity” to

describe this sort of relation, on the principle that if everything circulates freely, eventually, all accounts will balance out. Marcel Mauss was already making such an argument in lectures back in the 1930s (1947), but he also recognized the problems: while this might be true of Iroquois moieties, some relationships never balance out—for instance, between mother and child. His solution, “alternating reciprocity”—that we repay our parents by having children ourselves—is clearly drawn from his study of the Vedas, but it ultimately demonstrates that if one has already decided that all relations are based on reciprocity, one can always define the term so broadly as to make it true.

22. *Hostis*: see Benveniste 1972:72. The Latin terminology concerning hospitality emphasizes the absolute mastery of the house by its (male) owner as the precondition of any act of hospitality; Derrida (2000, 2001) argues that this points to a central contradiction in the very concept of hospitality, since it implies an already-existing absolute dominium or power over others, the kind that might be seen as taking its most exploitative form in Lot’s offering his own daughters up to a crowd of Sodomites to dissuade them from raping his houseguests. However, this same principle of hospitality can be equally well documented in societies—such as the Iroquois—that were anything but patriarchal.

23. Evans-Pritchard 1940:154, 158.

24. This is of course one reason why the very rich like to associate mainly with one another.

25. In a less hostile vein one can speak of an exchange of prisoners, notes, or compliments.

26. A good source on haggling: Uchen-do 1967.

27. Bohannon 1964:47.

28. Not even a real business deal, since these may often involve a great deal of collective wining and dining and giving of presents. More the sort of imaginary

business deal that appears in economics textbooks.

29. One need only glance at the vast anthropological literature on “competitive feasting”: e.g., Valeri 2001.

30. Bourdieu 1965 is the key text, but he repeats the main points in Bourdieu 1990:98–101.

31. Onvlee 1980:204.

32. Petronius 51; Pliny *Natural History* 36.195; Dio 57.21.5–7.

33. “This king is of all men the most addicted to the making of gifts and the shedding of blood. His gate is never without some poor man enriched or some living man executed.”

34. Or even the very rich. Nelson Rockefeller, for example, used to pride himself on never carrying a wallet. He didn’t need one. Every now and then when he was working late and wanted cigarettes, he would borrow some from the security people at the desk at Rockefeller Center, who would then be able to boast that they had lent a Rockefeller money and would rarely ask for it back. In contrast, “the sixteenth-century Portuguese monarch Dom Manuel, newly rich from the Indies trade, adopted the title ‘Lord of the Conquest, Navigation, and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India.’ Others called him the “grocer king.” (Ho 2004:227).

35. See Graeber 2001:175–76.

36. Even between strangers it’s a bit unusual: as Servet (1981, 1982) has emphasized, most “primitive trade” takes place through trade partnership and specialized regional middlemen.

37. I frame things this way because I am mainly interested here in economics. If we were thinking simply of human relations, I suppose one might say that at one extreme is killing, and at the other, giving birth.

38. In fact, it seems essential to the nature of charity that, like a gifts to a king, it can never lead to reciprocity. Even if it turns out that the pathetic-looking beggar is really a god wandering the earth in

mortal form, or Harun al-Rashid, your reward will be entirely disproportionate. Or consider all those stories about drunken millionaires on a binge who, when they got their life back together, hand out fancy cars or houses to their earlier benefactors. It’s easier to imagine a panhandler giving you a fortune than returning an exact equivalent to the dollar that you gave him.

39. Xenophon *Cyropedia* VIII.6, Herodotus 3.8.9; see Briant 2006:193–194, 394–404, who acknowledges that something broadly along these lines probably did take place, with a more impromptu gift system under Cyrus and Cambyses being systematized under Darius.

40. Marc Bloch (1961:114–15), who adds “every act, especially if it was repeated three or four times, was likely to be transformed into a precedent—even if in the first instance it had been exceptional or even frankly unlawful.”

41. The approach is often identified with British anthropologist A.M. Hocart (1936). The important thing is that this does not necessarily mean that these became their main or exclusive occupations: most of the time, such people remained simple farmers like everybody else. Yet what they did for the king, or later, on ritual occasions, for the community, was seen as defining their essential nature, their identity within the whole.

42. In fact, we may become indignant at her for an act of stinginess we would never even consider stingy in anyone else—especially, ourselves.

43. A version has been published as: Sarah Stillman, “The missing white girl syndrome: disappeared women and media activism” (Stillman, 2007): publications.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam/display.asp?K=002J1246&sf_01=cat_class&st_01=620&sort=SORT_DATE/d&m=84&dc=719

44. Karatani (2003:203–205) makes this point compellingly. The Kwakiutl and other First Nations of the Northwest Coast are something of an intermediary

case—aristocratic, but at least in the period we know about, using non-coercive means to gather resources (though Codere 1950.)

45. Georges Duby (1980) provides the definitive history of this concept, which goes back to much older Indo-European ideas.

46. For a typical example of imaginary reciprocity between father and son, see Oliver 1955:230. Anthropological theory buffs will notice that I am here endorsing Edmund Leach's (1961) position on the "circulating connubium" problem. He later applied the same argument to the famous "kula chain" (1983).

47. Actually, there are hierarchical relations that are explicitly self-subverting: the one between teacher and student, for example, since if the teacher is successful in passing her knowledge to the student, there is no further basis for inequality.

48. Freuchen 1961: 154. It's not clear what the original language was here, considering that the Inuit did not have an institution of slavery. Also, the passage would not make sense unless there were *some* contexts in which gift exchange did operate, and therefore, in which debts accrued. What the hunter is emphasizing is that it was felt important that this logic did not extend to basic needs like food.

49. Firth 1959:411–12 (also in Graeber 2001:175). His name was Tei Reinga.

50. For one famous example: Chagnon 1996:170–76.

51. Similarly, two groups might form an alliance by contracting a "joking relation," in which any member of one could at least in theory make similar outrageous demands of the other (Hébert 1958).

52. Marcel Mauss, in his famous "Essay on the Gift" (1924), often did, and the results have sometimes confused debate for generations to come.

53. Mauss 1925, the Greek source being Posidonius. As usual one does not know how literally to take this account. Mauss thought it likely accurate; I suspect it might have happened once or twice.

54. As retold by William Ian Miller (1993:15–16). The first quote is directly from the original, Egil's Saga, chapter 78. Egil remained ambivalent about the shield: he later took it to a wedding party and contrived to drop it into a vat of sour whey. Afterward, concluding it was ruined, he stripped it for its raw materials.

55. See, for instance, Wallace-Hadrill 1989.

56. Blaxter 1971:127–28.

57. Another anthropologist, for instance, defines patron-client relations as "long-term contracted relations in which the client's support is exchanged for the patron's protection; there is an ideology which is morally charged and appears to rule out strict, open accounting, but both parties keep some tacit rough account; the goods and services exchanged are not similar, and there is no implication of fair exchange or balance of satisfactions, since the client is markedly weaker in power and needs the patron more than he is needed by him" (Loizos 1977:115). Again, it both is and isn't an exchange, it's both a matter of accounting and not a matter of accounting.

58. It's exactly the same if one takes a job at a doughnut shop; legally, it must be a free contract between equals, even if in order to be able to say this we have to maintain the charming legal fiction that one of them is an imaginary person named "Krispy Kreme."

59. For instance the word "should," in English, originally derives from German *schuld*, meaning "guilt, fault, debt." Benveniste provides similar examples from other Indo-European languages (1963:58). East Asian languages such as Chinese and Japanese rarely conflate the actual words, but a similar identification of debt with sin, shame, guilt, and fault can be easily documented (Malamoud 1988).

60. Plutarch *Moralia* 303 B, also discussed in Finley 1981:152, Millett 1991a:42. Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas made it a matter of Catholic doctrine that sins were "debts of punishment" owed to God.

61. This is one reason why it's so easy to dress up other sorts of relationships as debts. Say one wishes to help out a friend in desperate need of money but doesn't want to embarrass her. Usually, the easiest way to do it is to provide the money and then insist that it's a loan (and then let both parties conveniently forget it ever happened). Or think of all the times and places where the rich acquire servants by advancing what is ostensibly a loan.

62. One could argue that some equivalent of "please" and "thank you" could be identified in any human language, if one were determined to find them, but then the terms you find are often used so differently—for instance, only in ritual contexts, or to hierarchical superiors—that it's hard to attach much significance to the fact. It is significant that over the last century or so just about every human language that is used in offices or to make transactions in shops has had to create terms that do function as an exact equivalent of the English "please," "thank you," and "you're welcome."

63. In Spanish one first asks a favor (*por favor*), and then says *gracias*, in order affirm you recognize one has been done for you, since it derives from the Latin word *gratia*, meaning "influence, or favor." "Appreciate" is more monetary: if you say "I really appreciate your doing that for me," you are using a word that derives from Latin *appretiare*, "to set a price."

64. "You're welcome," first documented in Shakespeare's time, derives from Old English *wilcuma*, *wil* being "pleasure" and *cuma* being "guest." This is why people are still welcomed into a house. It is thus like "be my guest," implying that, no, if there is an obligation it's on my part, as any host is obliged to be generous to guests, and that dispatching such obligations is a pleasure in itself. Still, it's significant that moralists rarely chide anyone for failure to say "you're welcome"—that one is much more optional.

65. Book I.12. This and other quotes are from the 2006 Penguin Screech translation, in this case, p. 86.

66. Compare the Medieval Arab philosopher Ibn Miskaway: "The creditor desires the well-being of the debtor in order to get his money back rather than because of his love for him. The debtor, on the other hand, does not take great interest in the creditor." (in Hosseini 2003:36).

67. Appropriate, since Panurge's entire discourse is nothing but a comical elaboration of Marcelo Ficino's argument that the entire universe is driven by the power of love.

Chapter Six

1. From: Peter Carlson, "The Relatively Charmed Life of Neil Bush," *The Washington Post*, Sunday December 28, 2003, Page D01.

2. Grierson 1977:20.

3. To be fair to Grierson, he does later suggest that slavery played an important part in the origins of money—though he never speculates about the gender, which seems significant: slave girls also served as the highest denomination of currency in Medieval Iceland (Williams 1937), and in the Rig Veda, great gifts and payments are regularly designated in "gold, cattle, and slave girls" (Chakravarti 1985:56–57). By the way, I say "young" because elsewhere, when slaves are used as monetary units, the unit is assumed to be a slave about 18–20 years old. A *cumal* was considered the equivalent in value of three milch cows or six heifers.

4. On *cumal* see Nolan 1926, Einzig 1949:247–48, Gerriets 1978, 1981, 1985, Patterson 1982:168–69, Kelly 1998:112–13. Most merely emphasize that *cumal* were just used as units of account and we don't know anything about earlier practices. It's notable, though, that in the law codes, when several different commodities are used as units of account, they will include