

# Elementa

*Intersections between Philosophy, Epistemology  
and Empirical Perspectives*

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3  
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The Gift

*Edited by Francesco Fistetti*

*Francesco Fistetti*  
EDITORIAL – What Is the Gift Paradigm? A Reading Guide 7

## FIRST SECTION

*Alain Caillé*  
Recent Extensions of the Gift 13

*Jacques T. Godbout*  
The Enduring Relevance of Mauss' *Essai sur le don* 41

*Francesco Fistetti*  
The Gift Paradigm: Towards a Science of “total social facts” 57

*Annalisa Caputo*  
Ricoeur, Gift and Poetics 79



## *Editorial*

# What Is the Gift Paradigm? A Reading Guide

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In this monographic section of *Elementa* dedicated to the paradigm of the gift, we present the contributions of a number of authors who programmatically inscribe themselves in the tradition of research that starts from the anthropology of Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), grandson of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), and arrives at the *Revue du MAUSS* (an acronym for Anti-Utilitarian Movement in the Social Sciences), founded by Alain Caillé in 1981. An astonishing number of essays about the problem of the gift in relation to topics of interest in contemporary theoretical reflection have been published by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychoanalysts, economists: from recognition to care, from hospitality to citizenship, from inequalities to universal income, from feminism to postcolonialism. Adding to this the fact that since 2021 the first issue of *MAUSS International*, the English version of the journal, has been launched in digital form, is possible to realise that we are facing, within the humanities, an intellectual quest of singular importance. The seminal text that gave birth to the paradigm of the gift and its extraordinary intellectual adventure is Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* (1925), which is still a long way from its full fruit: it is possible in fact to talk about its potential for development as a theory of social evolution in the transition from primitive and traditional societies to modernity, and at the same time in terms of analysis concerning the dynamics of reproduction/transformation in the modern and contemporary world. Since the gift, as Mauss expresses it, is a “total social fact”, i.e. a phenomenon that diagonally crosses all aspects of society (economic, political, aesthetic, symbolic, cultural, etc.),

the paradigm of the gift can be considered not as an *a priori* doctrine or a discipline closed in on itself, but as a powerful *operator of translation*. It constructs its own order by appropriating and retranslating other existing discourses. Caillé's book, *Extensions du domaine du don* (Arles, Actes Sud, 2019), which is the essay that constitute the Introduction, moves precisely in this direction: to indicate the multiple applications of the gift paradigm. Similarly, Philippe Chaniel's recent work, *Nos généreuses réciprocitys* (Arles, Actes Sud, 2022), explores the "family similarities" between gift and *care*, between gift and gender, between gift and nature, between gift and hospitality, between gift and the politics of emancipation. Again, on the relationship between gift and social justice a fundamental contribution was made by Elena Pulcini, *Tra cura e giustizia. Le passioni come risorsa sociale* (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2020). And, with regard to global justice in international relations, I have shown that the gift perspective leads to the need to adopt an "anti-sacrificial clause" in relations between nations, inspired by an imperative of solidarity and generosity towards the most disadvantaged peoples and states (Francesco Fistetti, *Théories du multiculturalisme. Un parcours entre philosophie et sciences sociales*, Paris, La Découverte, 2009).

Thanks to this intrinsic openness, the paradigm of the gift, as ALAIN CAILLÉ points out, can be continuously enriched by dialoguing with other theories and fields of knowledge. But where does this vocation to productively communicate and hybridise with other disciplines come from? It derives precisely from the twofold discovery that the *Essay on the Gift* makes: (1) what the so-called primitive societies (*sociétés primaires*) teach us is that in them religion, law, economics, politics, etc., are not separate dimensions, but form a "total social fact", of which the cycle of gift (giving/receiving/returning) constitutes "the rock of eternal morality" and, at the same time, "the rock" of politics; (2) from this it follows that man has not always been that "economic animal" – *homo aeconomicus* – that the economic and social sciences of modernity have celebrated. The pushing towards a tendency of an "encyclopaedic" recomposition of the fields of knowledge – without this meaning cancelling their epistemological specificity – stems from the critique of economic reductionism that makes the "axiomatics of interest" the fundamental ideology of modernity. It can be said that the recomposition of the fields of the human and social knowledge (and of moral and political philosophy) on the axis of the paradigm of the gift results in their rearticulation and enrichment both in terms of heuristic concepts and in terms of practical rationality. For example, since Mauss highlighted the agonistic dimension of the gift, i.e. its being linked to a struggle for recognition (of a hierarchical status, of a determined form of superiority, etc.),

Caillé developed this aspect barely hinted at in the *Essay*. In short, it is not only in *sociétés primaires* that the act of giving makes possible the recognition of the value of the recipient (usually an outsider clan) and vice versa the recognition by the latter towards the giver. Even in our societies, what Axel Honneth has called the “struggle for recognition” (of one’s individuality, one’s rights, social esteem) would be more ethically and politically fruitful if it were supplemented by the Maussian discovery of the gift. It would avert the mercatist drift of individual rights, that is, the risk that their fulfilment depends on the economic conditions of the subject, i.e. that rights become a market variable. In fact, recognition of the other is always also recognition of a gift or, as one might also say, recognition of the other as the giver of something absolutely peculiar. This integration between recognition and gift brings out in full light the dimension of positive indebtedness that characterises the entire course of our existence: ever since the gift of life in the womb, we are constantly indebted to those who take care of us, who have passed on to us moral values or techniques whatever they may be, taught us ways of being in the world, etc.

On the subject of positive indebtedness towards others, JACQUES T. GODBOUT has written important pages (*Le don, la dette, l’identité. Homo donator vs homo æconomicus*, Paris, La Découverte, 2000) and in the essay translated here, he explains that the “need” to donate derives precisely from the fact that we are, originally, in a state of debt towards others and that our very identity *ab initio* is “in a state of debt, and isn’t our identity built by making active what we have received, by giving in turn”.

On the originality that the theme of the gift has in Paul Ricœur, ANNALISA CAPUTO dwells in the fine essay published here. With respect to the characteristics of recognition (Caillé) and positive indebtedness (Godbout) associated with the gift, Caputo insists on the status that Ricœur attributes to the gift not only as “surprise” and “risk” (because it can be rejected and not recognised as such) but also, to use Ricœur’s words, as “un espace d’espérance”, “une onde d’irradiation et d’irrigation qui, de façon secrète et détournée, contribue à l’avancée de l’histoire vers des états de paix”: and it is, as Caputo points out, “the hidden counter-current in the history of violence”. While today in the heart of Europe a war is raging that may prelude the nuclear apocalypse, peace truly appears to be the greatest gift, a “gratuitousness” that would generate infinite “gratitude” in a virtuous circle of positive indebtedness. It was Marcel Hénaff who, in *Le don des philosophes* (Paris, Seuil, 2012), activated a fruitful dialogue between the Maussian paradigm of the ceremonial gift and the Ricœurian reflection on the link between gift and *agape*.

Alain Caillé, for his part, has shown how Ricœur's masterly analysis of the paths of recognition (*Parcours de la reconnaissance*, Paris, Stock, 2004) must be enriched with the Maussian discovery of the gift as an agonistic gift and as the political operator of a covenant of coexistence between strangers. Both of them, Hénaff and Caillé, have demonstrated the groundlessness of the suspicion that, starting from phenomenological and Heideggerian positions, authors such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion nurtured towards the gift paradigm when they believed they saw in the gift the sublimation of a utilitarian interest.

Finally, as far as I am concerned, I have recently tried to develop the link between the struggle for recognition, as enucleated by Mauss and Honneth, and the concept of hegemony elaborated by Antonio Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*. In fact, just as every struggle for recognition (of the individual, of a social group, of states) is a struggle for the recognition of a gift, it is at the same time a struggle for hegemony, understood not only in terms of material or socio-economic power relations, but also as a conception of the world and as culture in the anthropological sense, capable of opposing the dominant ideology of generalised utilitarianism. Hence the need to come to terms, to "lay down one's arms", i.e. to constantly renegotiate the rules and values of democratic coexistence in order to make it ever more inclusive and participatory. As Mauss states at the end of the *Essay*, reactivating the cycle of the gift (giving/receiving/returning) consists, today more than ever, in understanding that, in order to build a common and plural world, the conditions of a social (and, one might add, geopolitical) order must be established in which "to oppose without slaughtering each other and to give without sacrificing themselves to one another".

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