

Things: Useful Dichotomies and Working Definitions

Gift-Exchange	Commodity-Exchange Society
Personal gift-giving interactions predominate	Impersonal commodity exchange dominates
Gift-givers tend to know gift receivers	Objects exchanged in impersonalized exchange contexts
Personal attachment in the exchange	Objects do not retain anything of giver's identity
Giving binds giver and receiver in mutual obligations	No further obligations are implied after transaction

Inalienable Objects	Alienable Objects
Object is not parted with completely in exchange	Object is parted with completely in exchange
Object may retain something of giver's 'identity'	Object does not retain anything of the 'identity' of the giver
Receiver of object may have use rights only, needing to return the object eventually or return another object somehow 'equal' to it	Buyer/Receiver gets rights to use and to dispose of object without having to return anything further to giver

Three answers to Mauss' question: Why Reciprocate?

1. Object has a 'spirit' of its own which compels giver to return it to its origin
2. Object has some identity (or 'spirit') of the giver which compels the receiver to return it, or reciprocate in kind
3. The giver retains rights over the object and so there is a debt created: The receiver 'owes' the giver something. The receiver must return an object which s/he also has complete rights over for the debt to be paid.

This gets more complicated, as Mauss elaborates in the next chapter: Suppose Susan gives Charles a gift--an object which Susan owned completely, and which is associated with her. Now, suppose that Charles does not have a gift like that right now, so he gives the gift Susan gave him to Sally. Sally DOES have a special gift all her own to give. She gives it to Charles and he gives it to Susan. What has happened? Susan and Sally have indirectly reciprocated with one another. Even though it was Charles who did the initial receiving and the final giving, the two objects were associated with Susan and Sally. Now suppose that just having the objects move around makes them worth more--not necessarily in the sense of money, but in terms of prestige, specialness, and so forth. Think of the great-grandmother's wedding ring one of you mentioned. It gets more special depending on how long it stays in the family and passes between people. And that specialness depends on remembering that it originally belonged to your great-grandmother. In the societies Mauss describes, the fact that an object gets more special brings prestige to the person receiving it and passing it on and may even enable that person to receive other gifts. For this reason, Charles may have benefitted from being an intermediary between Susan and Sally and he will have to reciprocate at some point in time.