Gratuitous relation: Illich and the play of religion, money, and gift

by Oscar Krüger

I: Introduction

Gifts on the one hand, money on the other. Each is a manner of making claims on our actions, and by which we claim the acts of others. This essay offers a provisional reflection, in three parts, on prominent critiques levelled from the standpoint of one towards the other – and the distance which Illich's position occupies in relation to both.

I: Money

Once upon a time, Erysichthon, king of Thessaly, found himself desiring a new banqueting hall. Such a hall needs walls, a roof, a doorway… for all of which one needs the appropriate materials. Not wanting for wood, the king directed his workers to a grove of trees to supply the lumber. But as the men proceeded with their task, they came upon a sacred tree protected by Demeter. They refused to proceed. Out of frustration, Erysichthon grabbed the axe for himself and—ignoring pleas arising from the very depths of the woods, from the divinities, from the dryad which dwelled in the tree—felled it. Demeter, filled with fury at this sacrilege, cursed the king with an insatiable hunger, which food only served to fuel. Driven to eat endlessly, the king sold all his possessions and, in the end, even his own daughter, until he was finally compelled to devour himself.

In a 2009 address delivered in Glasgow, the classicist Richard Searford turns to this ancient myth as if it were a mythological account of what was, at the time, a new technol-

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ogy; a reflection developed by a people not yet accustomed to its effects. That new technology was money. Or, more specifically, coinage, as a material token (solid, enduring, moveable) whose value resides in the fiduciary function of the stamp imprinted on its surface. And with this technology, in the very city which was at the time becoming the world's first monetized society, arose the way of life known as philosophy.[1] Just like coinage "[implies] a homogeneous ideal substance distinct from the metal in which the sign is expressed",[2] so also these philosophers for the very first time began to imagine the cosmos as an order of impersonal power, intelligible as "a single substance underlying the plurality of things manifest to the senses".[3] As philosophy moved across the Aegean Sea to take residence in Athens, these origins are perhaps most strongly discerned in the philosophical method of inquiry rather than in its postulates. As Deleuze shows, the Platonic dialogues follow a distinct pattern.[4] First, a myth is deployed to indicate what something really is. Then, a series of successive claimants to the title of being an authentic copy of that something is examined, in an endeavour to sort good copies from counterfeit ones. Very much, that is, as one would already have to sort authentic coins from counterfeit ones.

Whatever the origin of philosophy may owe to the origin of coinage—neither Seaford nor I propose any monocausal "explanation"—their subsequent relation has been fraught with tension. As D.C. Schindler points out, the very first defence which Socrates invokes at that trial which precedes his

1 David Graeber points out that coinage emerged simultaneously also in northern China and by the Ganges. In each case we find similar transformations in thinking: D. Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Melville House, New York, 2012, p. 212.

2 R. Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, p. 137.

3 Ivi, p. 175.

4 G. Deleuze, "Plato and the Simulacrum", *October* 27, pp. 45–56.

death, asserts something which scarcely relates to the charges actually laid against him: that he has never charged money for teaching. The effect of the claim, however, was to distinguish Socrates from the class of teachers known as sophists, and to so distinguish the philosophy of Socrates from the techniques of persuasion taught by the latter—and taught for a fee. Thus, an orientation to the Good on the one hand, and an orientation to money on the other. This contrast becomes poignant precisely due to their apparent similarity, where both appear as boundless universal substances beyond appearances. The value of money is nonetheless a counterfeit double, insofar as it is distinct *from* its material instantiations rather than manifest *through* them. [5]

Much as among the storytellers who first told us of Erysichthons' misadventures, this thinking recognizes the immense powers that the small symbol of money exercise upon the hearts of men. Likewise, it recognizes the ruin money can bring, as it sets men on an endless pursuit of an empty symbol, divorced from any measure of what is *really* true, good, beautiful, as the sacred tree of Demeter must surely have been, standing in its sacred grove. Into Aristotle this hostility survives. *Chrematistics,* this philosopher called money-making for the sake of money-making, and warned particularly against

> […] usury, which makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural object of it. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest. And this term interest, which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. Wherefore of all modes of

5 D. C. Schindler, "Why Socrates didn't charge: Plato and the metaphysics of money", *Communio* 36, 2009.

> getting wealth, this is the most unnatural.[6]

In Aristotle, this critique of money is animated by a valorisation of community, of the city. The foundation for the city, in turn, was friendship; "friendship holds cities together" (Book VIII), he asserts, turning the friend also into the reason for having a city in the first place. "Surely", he held, "it is strange, too, to make the supremely happy man a solitary; for no one would choose the whole world on condition of being alone".
Similarly for Aquinas, this most influential Aristotelian of the Middle Ages:

> If the citizens themselves devote their life to matters of trade, the way will be opened to many vices. Since the foremost tendency of tradesmen is to make money, greed is awakened in the hearts of the citizen through the pursuit of trade. The result is that everything in the city will become venal; good faith will be destroyed and the way opened to all kinds of trickery; each one will work only for his own profit, despising the public good; the cultivation of virtue will fail since honour, virtue's reward, will be bestowed upon the rich. Thus in such a city, civil life will necessarily be corrupted.[7]

In Aquinas, furthermore, this is a stand buttressed by a tradition we now speak of as religious. "You cannot serve both God and money", holds one of the most renowned passages of this religious tradition. Furthermore, as Illich posits, the story where Jesus instructs Peter to recover a coin from the mouth of a fish (for the purposes of paying tax) is a gesture which "is that of a clown; it shows that this mira-

6 Aristotle, Politics, Book I, Part X

7 Aquinas, cited in M. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 263-264.

cle is not meant to prove him omnipotent but indifferent to matters of money".[8] At this point, philosophy and religion are linked in their repudiation of money. But what then about the other side of the coin?

II: Gifts

For many, the alternative to money and commodity is manifest in that "ordinary but decent wine"[9] a new acquaintance might hand you as he steps across your doorstep. As a performance which, in some contexts, conforms to almost ritual expectations, this act nonetheless ensnares you in the webs of the gift. Ostensibly free, the real substance of gift – as originally demonstrated by the great anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his 1925 essay *The Gift* – is the threefold obligation by which it binds: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, the obligation to return. In a fashion which is highly symptomatic of the shortcomings of analytical models in vogue today, this relatively straightforward proposition has proved immensely resistant to assimilation into the modern social and economic sciences.

This is because it is crucial, if we are to come to terms with the gift, to conceive of the manner by which it involves not individual actors defined separately from the transactive strategies they pursue; what Mauss demonstrated, fundamentally, was "the possibility of interpenetration as a durable condition", where, "the gift I give to you, and that is incorporated into your very being, remains fully conjoined to me. Through the gift, my awareness penetrates yours–I am with you in your thoughts–and in your counter-gift, you are with

8 I. Illich, "The Educational Enterprise in the Light of the Gospel", *Unpublished Manuscript,* 1988. David Tinapples collection, https://www.davidtinapple.com/illich/1988_Educational.html

9 I. Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*, edited by David Cayley, House of Anansi Press, Toronto, 2005, p. 146.

me in mine. And so long as we continue to give and receive, this interpenetration can carry on or perdure. Our lives are bound or drawn together as literally as two hands clasping".[10]

This perduration only works because gifts are *not* "free", and because this clasp–this obligation – thus holds together the perpetual motion which generates the human world. This is the inverse of the commodity, as that thing where obligations (and hence relations) terminate at the point where money is transferred back to the original giver. And this is precisely why so many of those who are now concerned with the disorder propelled by money turn from money to gift, as from commodity to community. On the one hand, this turn aligns with the ancient critique of money, which–as is very clear in Aristotle–was nourished by a rallying around community. But if this critique is so ancient, how come that money was nonetheless triumphant? Because of structural and material processes surely. But not only, as Albert O. Hirschman shows.[11] Commerce ascended its place due the ideological work of some who, as a mirror image of those who now propose that gifts can solve the crisis brought about by money, once believed that money can solve the problem that is community and gift.

The context for this was the early modern Wars of Religion. As communities of faith were pitted against each other, and the lands of Europe were engulfed by carnage, some intellectuals suddenly found in money–and in the very same features for which money had been rebuked–the key to a brighter, better future. Community ties, feudal fealty, honour and pride; these lead to the devastation these men faced all around them. *Money,* however, appeals not only to some group then inevitably pitted against another, but to *everybody.* And if ev-

10 T. Ingold, *The Life of Lines*, Routledge, Oxon, 2015, pp. 10-11.

11 A. O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977.

erybody can be made to look to their economic self-interest first, their propensity to pursue non-economic distractions (like glory, or conquest) would abate, and human conduct become predictable for as long as money still exercises its appeal–which, as the ancients well knew, means forever.

Nowhere is the ethical and political preference for commodities over gift as articulate as in the works of that one person to whom economists to this day owe their fundamental categories: Adam Smith. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner", goes the widely renowned declaration made by Smith in the *Wealth of Nations*, "but from their regard to their own interest".[12] Less famous, however, is the direct continuation: "Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens".

Smith's statement was never a naturalisation of greed, but a critique of the gift. This critique, in turn, stemmed from an acute awareness of how gifts so easily entrench inequalities between donor and recipient, and underpin the bonds of obedience which bind servant to master, subordinate to their–perhaps "benevolent" – superior.[13] As parties to a commercial contract, instead, the beggar might find himself not a subordinate of the butcher or baker, but their equal. Perhaps even their friend, once business hours are over, and they find themselves gathered in the halls of the brewer.[14]

"Gift" and "community". Also etymologically, these belong together, through the *munus* in *co-munus*.[15] Yet *munus*

12 A. Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981[1776], p. 18.

13 As Illich was very well aware. See S. Ravenscroft, "Modernity and the Economics of Gift and Charity: On Ivan Illich's Critique of Abstract Philanthropy", *Telos* 174, 2016, pp. 149–70.

14 L. Bruni, op. cit.

15 R. Esposito, *Communitas: Origine e Destino Della Comunità. Nuova Edizione Ampliata*, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Turin, 1998.

also means duty, and arguably

> The ambivalence of the *munus*–gift and obligation–can and should be read in terms of its intra- and inter-community dimensions. The inter-community circle of gift shows the twofold nature of the *munus*; but in the context of intra-community relations only the obligation component of gift exists, generally in a servant-to-master hierarchical dynamics. The members of the community (wives, children, slaves, servants...) are "expropriated" because there is nothing they can call their own, except for the obligation they have towards the community. [16]

When addressing that ancient world, where the division of secular and the religious domains of power were yet to be invented, some deploy the word *religion* to speak of these bonds: *re-ligio,* binding together, of both divinities and mortals.[17] What money once seemed to offer was freedom from such religion, meaning freedom from the bonds and duties and passions which suture and separate superior from inferior, friend from enemy. And in that light, the hopes attached to money is perhaps not altogether different from the promise gift seems to hold today.

What to make of all this?

16 L. Bruni, *The Genesis and Ethos of the Market*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, 2012, p. 11.

17 e.g. Ivi, p. 6. See however Agamben for the possibility of reading religion towards *religare* rather than *religere,* i.e. to re-read: *Profanations*. Zone Books, New York, 2007. This opens the term to different yet entirely pertinent possibilities of Illichian reflection: I. Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993.

III: Illich

The friend–that *philos* which appears in the very name of the philosophers' enterprise[18]–was the cornerstone on which Illich developed one of the 20th century's most profound critiques of money and markets. But while going back to Plato and Cicero to build his understanding of friendship, he would nonetheless insist that "friendship can never mean the same thing for me as it does to Plato".[19] And while he remained a man of the cloth throughout his adult life, he would also insist: "I don't want to be a religious man. I am the descendant of the martyrs who, according to Roman law which was very solid and precise, were thrown to the beasts as truly irreligious [*veri irreligiosi*]; they were people who somehow understood that Jesus freed us from what was then, as today, called religion".[20]

What the preceding sections have outlined is neither money-making nor gift-giving, but the kinds of critique which is levelled from the standpoint of one in direction of the other. The critique of commodities Illich developed from the 1970s onwards, would appear to align him squarely with the latter camp. Few concepts appear as frequently in his writing and speeches as do the word "gift", including the one from whence this journal takes its name: *Das Geschenk* – the gift – *der Conspiratio*. "I cannot come to be fully human", he would say, "unless I have received myself as a gift and accepted myself as a gift of somebody who has, well today we say distorted me the way you distorted me by loving me." His valorisation of traditional communities, furthermore, appears classically Aristotelian where he defends *vir-*

18 G. Agamben, *L'amico*. Nottetempo, Rome, 2007.

19 I. Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future,* op cit., p. 147.

20 I. Illich, "The Personal Decision in a World Dominated by Communication", *Conspiratio* 4, 2023, pp. 98–110.

tue as "that shape, order and direction of action informed by tradition, bounded by place, and qualified by choices made within the habitual reach of the actor; we mean practice mutually recognized as being good within a shared local culture that enhances the memories of a place".[21]

Nonetheless, the friend of Illich was not the philosopher's friend, as he appeared in the shape of Aristoteles' highly guarded circle of equals, gathered on the basis of self-similarity.[22] For reasons which will be familiar to all who have studied his teaching, the friend of Illich was a stranger from beyond the city walls, encountered not as an alter-ego but in "the total otherness of someone", for whom he "renounce[d] searching for bridges between the other and me, recognizing that a gulf separates us".[23] His community, likewise, was not the ancient community of re-ligion, or collective rituals or sacred hierarchies; it was something found in "niches, free spaces, squatters arrangements, spiritual tents which some of us might be capable to offer, not for "the dropout in general" but each of us for a small "list" of others who, through the experience of mutual obedience have become able to renounce integration in the "system."

The intention for the present essay is simply this: to provide some context for reflecting on Illich's critique of economics and commodities as not only a reappropriation of ancient logics of gift and community. In fact, many of the liberatory (and precocious) transformations he reads towards the Parable of the Good Samaritan could be read in a materialist fashion, towards money and markets as liberators from communities and bonds of duty. Yet just as Illich's historical

21 I. Illich et al., *Declaration on Soil.* A joint statement, drafted in Hebenshausen, Germany, December 6, 1990, https://www.davidtinapple.com/illich/1990_declaraion_soil.PDF.

22 T. Everett, "The Conspiratio of Ivan Illich and the Kiss of Peace", *Conspiratio,* Fall, 2023, pp. 216–58.

23 I. Illich, "The Educational Enterprise in the Light of the Gospel", op cit.

narratives differ from such materialist approaches, so the distance he takes from the sacred communities of old differs from that taken by the ideologues of money. He *does* pursue a reappropriation of the logic of gift–yet he appears to do so in a manner which has radically transformed that which it reappropriates. And this transformation takes place around the category of "obedience".

Gifts create bonds of obedience, and Samar Farage–a friend of Illich–recalls how he would address friends: "Tell me what to do and I will obey you".[24] This is not obedience to inherited duty or position. So what obedience is it, then? At one point, Illich speaks of his faith, and of how the salvation it offers "is not offered through the power of his doctrine, but through trust in his person". "Modern English has lost the word for this kind of trust", he continues", but "[t] he biblical word for it is obedience. Obedience in the biblical sense means unobstructed listening, unconditional readiness to hear, untrammeled disposition to be surprised".

A long tradition of thinking identifies the trajectory of Western philosophy as an arc, directed by the endeavour to render being stable, predictable, secure. The core Christian experience of the world, by contrast, was one of contingency; of a cosmos bereft of natural necessity.[25] The world is as it is, but none of it was ever *necessary,* and any moment it can be made anew. *Grace* is the word Illich used to contrast this contingent world to the world of the modern philosophers which is "immune to grace". But, again, this grace was a matter of faith – of "trust in his person" – not religious doctrine. What Illich spoke of when speaking of grace was *gratuity,* or existing "just so, for the fun of it, for your sake …" which "in its

24 S. Farage, "Remembering Illich's Convivium", *Conspiratio* 1, 2021, pp. 136–45.

25 G. Agamben, *Karman: Breve Trattato Sull'azione, La Colpa e Il Gesto*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2017.

most beautiful flowering, is praise, mutual enjoyment".[26]

Illich's biographers show us a person who sought to live this sense of contingent gratuity to the fullest. They also show us a man who handled money, gave and received gifts, issued and obeyed direct commands. Each is a way by which claims are made on us. Illich appears to listen and to hearken to these claims. Yet re-planted in the soil of a gratuitous experience of the world, the obedience each demands is transformed, now (paradoxically) into a freedom of obedience rather than submission. It would be presumptuous to derive a programme for monetary reform or for constructing a new kind of gift-economy from these reflections, yet perhaps one might uncover a way of better facing the times which are ours to face.

26 I. Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future,* op cit., pp. 227-229.