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Meetings

Gifts without exchange

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ABSTRACT This article examines the different theories of meeting offered by Durkheim, Mauss, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, Bohm, Levinas and Buber. Through this examination we question the common assumption that social life, and more particularly the gift, is based on exchange – on the sequence of giving, receiving and reciprocating – which is fundamentally a Hegelian logic of subjects and objects. While many aspects of social life take this form, true meeting is characterized by a quality of grace; it occurs only when the Hegelian world gives way to a presence that has a different temporality, spatiality and ontology. This world is glimpsed, but inadequately conceptualized, in Durkheim's theory of religious congregation, which is characterized by a tension between identity and relational logics.

KEYWORDS Durkheim, exchange, gift, grace, Mauss, meeting, respect, ritual, sacred, subjects

This article looks at how the primal moment of meeting has been conceived by a range of social theorists, including Durkheim, Mauss, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, Bohm, Levinas and Buber. Through the differences between these accounts, we will question the common assumption that social life, and more particularly the gift, is based on exchange: on the sequence of giving, receiving and reciprocating, the calculation of status, risk and obligation, which is fundamentally a Hegelian logic of subjects and objects (see Peperzak, 2002: 164). While many aspects of social life take this form, true meeting is characterized by a quality of grace; it occurs only when the Hegelian world gives way to a presence that has a different temporality, spatiality and ontology. Whereas exchange takes place in a world of identities, the gift can only be understood in terms of the non-finite quality of relations.

We will introduce the theory of gift exchange by retelling the orthodox story of its place in the history of sociological thought. This story focuses on the different understandings of meeting offered by Emile Durkheim and his nephew, Marcel Mauss.



Durkheim and congregation

Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1976) relies on a theory of meeting. The 'cult' has 'the preponderating role' in religion because it is the regular congregation of participants in ritual that brings to consciousness the social force that people recognize through religious representations:

[W]hoever has really practised a religion knows very well that it is the cult that gives rise to these impressions of joy, of interior peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm which are, for the believer, the experimental proof of his beliefs ... This is because society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that [society] takes consciousness of itself and realizes its position. (1976: 417–18)

By meeting and acting together, people are transformed, according to Durkheim. Their senses of time, space and being are altered by the presence of others. They experience an eternal time that suspends chronological time. The objects of veneration for which they had assembled are no longer external and inert, but seem the source of the energy actually generated by assembly itself. People feel stronger, more capable, more alive.

According to Durkheim, this transformation is known through a sense of awe. The regularly repeated experience of awe, bringing awareness of the sacred, reminds people that they are not who they had been thinking they were:

[I]f collective life awakens religious thought on reaching a certain degree of intensity, it is because it brings about a state of effervescence which changes the conditions of psychic activity. Vital energies are over-excited, passions more active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this moment. A man does not recognise himself; he feels transformed and consequently he transforms the environment which surrounds him. In order to account for the very particular impressions which he receives, he attributes to the things with which he is in most direct contact properties which they have not, exceptional powers and virtues which the objects of everyday experience do not possess. (1976: 422)

This account of the lively power of congregation contains untapped conceptual potential, not consistently recognized by Durkheim himself. Later in the article we draw out its potential within a relational logic, which sees meeting as the creative presence of undefined difference. First, though, we will elaborate on the criticisms of the orthodox reading of his work, which understands meeting in terms of identity logic, as a reassertion of sameness.

Although the term *conscience collective* is found in Durkheim's early books (see Lukes, 1973: 4–8), it also underlies the identity-based strand of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. These passages imply



that society is an independent being, capable of expressing its *conscience* through individuals who are gathered together:

It is in assimilating the ideals elaborated by society that [the individual] has become capable of conceiving the ideal. It is society which, by leading him within its sphere of action, has made him acquire the need of raising himself above the world of experience and has at the same time furnished him with the means of conceiving another. For society has constructed this new world in constructing itself, since it is society which this expresses. (Durkheim, 1976: 423)

Seen this way, ritual congregation is the regular realignment of *conscience* whereby individuals realize their solidarity, their identity as one; meeting is the return to sameness through which society can express the sacred ideals and beliefs that direct its members.

Many have complained of the abstraction and reification that characterizes this strand of thought in Durkheim. Steven Lukes (1973: 314) and Mary Douglas (1990: xii) both offer long lists of critics referring to Durkheim's 'sociological metaphysics'. For some, Durkheim has failed by pitching his theories at a level that could not be 'validated by observation', nor explained in terms of the actions of identifiable individuals (Douglas, 1990: xii). For others, and for us, the problem is that Durkheim substitutes the total for the whole, the thing for the relation, the abstract for the real, the finite and identified society for the never-finished and non-finite social process.

Mauss and gift

Critics have often found the solutions to Durkheim's theoretical problems in the work of Mauss. Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, sees Durkheim as the demiurge of French intellectual history, whose work gave the tradition both its power and its dangerous, unscientific tendencies (1966b, 1987). It was Mauss who led French sociology to a safe place within sight of the 'promised land' (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 45), shifting social and cultural theory from a basis in transcendent sacredness and ritual to a more scientific and realistic basis in gift exchange: 'Mauss's mission was to finish and furnish the prodigious edifice sprung from the earth at the passage of the demiurge ... and to exorcise some metaphysical phantoms that were still trailing their chains in it' (Lévi-Strauss, 1966b: 113). Mary Douglas tells a similar story:

Mauss ... introduced a realistic idea of individuals in the pre-market social system where, according to Durkheim's formulations, one might expect only a community of humans mechanically connected to one another by their unquestioning use of the same ideas ... [Mauss] also discovered a mechanism by which individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in market exchange ... The gift cycle echoes Adam Smith's invisible hand



... Like the market, it supplies each individual with personal incentives for collaborating in the pattern of exchanges. (Douglas, 1990: xiii–xiv)

Douglas's point is highlighted by the short meeting story that Mauss tells in his conclusion to *The Gift*:

When two groups of men meet ... they may move away or in case of mistrust or defiance they may resort to arms; or else they can come to terms ... The people of Kiriwana said to Malinowski: 'The Dobu man is not good as we are. He is fierce, he is a man-eater. When we come to Dobu, we fear him, he might kill us! But see! I spit the charmed ginger root and their mind turns. They lay down their spears, they receive us well.' Nothing better expresses how close together lie festival and warfare. (Mauss, 1970: 79–80)

Mauss tells this story to show the victory of reason over emotion: societies have progressed to the extent that their members and groups have been 'able to stabilize their contracts and to give, receive and repay' (Mauss, 1970: 80). Mauss's major claim was that gifts necessarily involve three inseparable actions: giving, receiving and reciprocating. Gift is always exchange: it is the fact that each step in the gift cycle is apparently voluntary and yet also obligatory that ties groups together through time. Because society is arising from the exchange between subjects, it relies on the constant reinforcement of subjecthood. In this way, Mauss derives society from opposition (cf. Simmel, 1964). Gift exchange allows people 'to oppose one another without slaughter and to give without sacrificing themselves to others' (1970: 80).

The connection between warfare and gift exchange explains why Mauss chooses the fiercely competitive potlatch as the model for gift giving. The key issue, he says, is the preservation and enhancement of 'face', by which he means identity, rank, dignity and persona. To give is to put the other 'in the shadow of [your] name', to seek self-certainty by 'flattening' the other, but through this agonistic process, Mauss says, groups are tied together (1970: 38). As Sahlins observed, and as Douglas's comment suggests, Mauss moved Durkheimian sociology closer to the individualist assumptions underlying British theories of social contract (Hobbes, [1651] 1968; Macpherson, 1964; Sahlins, 1972: 149ff; see also Pateman, 1988). But in France, Mauss's book was to be read through its parallels with Hegel's story of the meeting of self-consciousnesses that produces the master/slave relation (Hegel, 1977: 104ff).

Sartre and reciprocity

Mauss's *The Gift* was published in 1925, just before French intellectual life was reshaped by Alexandre Kojève's famous lectures on Hegel. As Grosz remarks (1989: 2), these lectures left a lasting impact on a whole generation of French intellectuals, including Sartre, de Beauvoir, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and Bataille (see Sartre, 1968: 17). This confluence of Maussian



and neo-Hegelian traditions refocused French social thought around the problems of exchange.

To illustrate this confluence of Mauss and Hegel, we will compare the meeting stories of two theorists on Grosz's list. Jean-Paul Sartre and Lévi-Strauss had well-known disagreements (see Lévi-Strauss, 1966a: 245ff; Sartre, [1960] 1976: 479ff), but the Hegelian assumptions which Sartre set out in the primal scene in *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, [1943] 1966) closely match the explicitly Maussian assumptions underlying the equivalent scene in Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Lévi-Strauss, [1949] 1969). Sartre not only praised the 'excellence' of Lévi-Strauss's account (Sartre, [1960] 1976: 106–7), he built upon its analysis of potlatch when bringing his thought to fruition in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

'Hell is other people,' Sartre famously claimed, and in *Being and Nothingness* he located hell in a public park. He imagines sitting there, in the park, grass and trees at measurable distances around him. And then the fall – another man enters the park:

[I]nstead of a grouping *toward me* of the objects, there is now an orientation *which flees from me* ... [T]here is a total space which is grouped around the Other, and this space is made with *my space* ... [T]he very quality of the object, [the grass's] deep, raw green is in direct relation to this man. This green turns toward the Other a face which escapes me. I apprehend the relation of the green to the Other as an objective relation, but I can not apprehend the green *as it appears to the Other*. Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me ... [I]t appears that the world has a kind of drain hole in the middle of its being and that it is perpetually flowing off through this hole. (Sartre, [1943] 1966: 342–3)

In this account, the world is an array of objects set out in an abstract empty homogenous Euclidean space that is centred on the subject. The other is a thief who steals my world by threatening to turn me into an object of *his* world. In other words, the world is stolen because I cannot be where the other is without losing where I am. The world is his or it is mine: we do not bring the world alive for each other but steal it from one another. I look at him and, rather than the revitalization of communion and congregation, feel life drain from me.

When Sartre imagines the beginning of social life, in a public park, he sees an enactment of Hegel's master/slave story. Although he later came to criticize the individualism of this account (Sartre, 1968), his subsequent emphasis on liberation, solidarity and revolutionary projects only tied him closer to his Hegelian assumptions. We find, therefore, that the model set out in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* begins from an assumption of primal scarcity and desire that serializes subjects: they are side-by-side units, unable to be face-to-face because their relation is always mediated by the 'practico-inert' upon which their rivalrous desires are fixed (Sartre, [1960] 1976: 122ff). When Sartre tries to imagine this anti-social hell being overcome, in common revolutionary cause, he turns to the possibility of exchange, and



particularly the mediated exchange of such pledges as the Tennis Court Oath. Individuals exchange pledges to a mediating identity in order to guarantee sameness against the difference of time ([1960]1976: 419–20). But although this exchange of pledges produces a unity by remaking identities around a new enemy, it is a solidarity permanently shadowed by Jacobin Terror. The ‘brother’ who affirms my voluntary servitude to the ‘statutory group’ must remain my potential enemy because they retain the ability to differ, to betray and oppose the ‘us’. The Hegelian life and death struggle for self-certainty remains.

Lévi-Strauss and exchange

Lévi-Strauss must have been aware that, within the structure of his history of French sociology, he was to Mauss as Mauss was to Durkheim (see Godelier, 1999: 18). His stated ‘mission’ was to complete Mauss’s work by removing from *The Gift* its own residual ‘illusions’ and ‘mystifications’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 47).

Lévi-Strauss asks us to imagine two male peasants, both strangers, who have been forced to sit ‘less than a yard apart, face to face on both sides of a table in a cheap restaurant’ in the south of France ([1949] 1969: 59). According to Lévi-Strauss, this situation offers ‘material for inexhaustible sociological reflection’. It is ‘a “total social fact” – on a microscopic scale ... an example ... of the formation of a group, for which ... no ready-made formula of integration exists’ ([1949] 1969: 58–9). From this example, Lévi-Strauss will draw out the centrality of the gift exchange, the prohibition of incest, the elementary structures of kinship and the basic exchange logic underlying all social life, whether in the field of kinship, economics, art, science or religion of culture: ‘[W]e believe that [these] are phenomena of the same type, that they are elements of the same cultural complex, or more exactly of the basic complex of culture’ ([1949] 1969: 61)

Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the diners’ situation begins with the reserve and hostility that implicitly underlie Sartrean seriality:

A conflict exists ... [The diners] feel both alone and together, compelled to the usual reserve between strangers, while their respective spatial positions, and their relationships to the objects and utensils of the meal, suggest, and to a certain extent call for, intimacy ... An almost imperceptible anxiety is likely to arise in the minds of these table-companions with the prospect of trifling disagreements that the meeting might produce. (Lévi-Strauss, [1949] 1969: 59)

When the second diner sat down, the first was as aggrieved as the person whose green grass was stolen in Sartre’s story. The otherness of each is a dangerous recalcitrance that threatens self-certainty: if I can treat the other as an object, they can do the same to me, thereby draining my world.



Lévi-Strauss resolves this Hegelian dilemma, as Sartre does in *Critique*, with an exchange. Each diner has before him a small bottle of wine, holding only one glassful, and one diner pours his bottle into his neighbour's glass. His neighbour immediately makes a corresponding gesture of reciprocity. Lévi-Strauss comments that this

exchanging of wine ... is an assertion of good grace which does away with mutual uncertainty. It substitutes a social relationship for spatial juxtaposition ... Wine offered calls for wine returned, cordiality requires cordiality ... In this way a whole range of trivial social ties are established by a series of alternating oscillations, in which offering gives one a right, and receiving makes one obligated, and always beyond what has been given or accepted. ([1949] 1969: 59)

We will return later to the concepts of good grace and calling, which we think Lévi-Strauss misunderstands. At the moment we observe that social life is, in this account, the by-product of the actions of desirous subjects acting on a world of objects. If social life is a series of oscillating exchanges, social relationships are not the *replacement* of juxtaposition, as Lévi-Strauss claims, but only the simple *alternation* of positions. Relations are simply seen as exchanges of objects by would-be subjects, taking place in Euclidean space and chronological time. Because the other is only a mirror of the self, there is no creative difference in this interchange. This is a long way from Durkheim's emphasis on awe and effervescence, on ontological, spatial and temporal transformation.

Although Lévi-Strauss suggests that exchanges are not always calculated ([1949] 1969: 42), his conclusion to the diners' story suggests that strategy is fundamental to exchange logic. Just as solidarity for Sartre is the organization of terror, the gift exchange is a form of potlatch for Lévi-Strauss, another manifestation of the Hegelian life-and-death struggle for self-certainty. Accordingly, Lévi-Strauss links the meeting of the diners to the meeting in the marketplace of the Chukchee people, who proffer their goods on spear points:

The person beginning the cycle [by pouring the first glass of wine] seizes the initiative, and the greater social ease which he has displayed puts him at an advantage. For the opening always involves a risk, in that the table-companion may respond to the drink offered with a less generous glass, or the contrary risk that he will take the liberty to bid higher, obliging the one who made the first offer (and we must not forget that the bottle is small) either to lose his last trump as his last drop, or to sacrifice another bottle for the sake of prestige ... [T]he respective attitudes of the strangers in the restaurant appear to be an infinitely distant projection ... of a fundamental situation, that of individuals of primitive bands coming into contact for the first time. ([1949] 1969: 60; cf. Bataille, 1985)

As Lévi-Strauss says, the history of French sociological thought is the triumph of this exchange theory. The exchange assumptions underlying



his structuralism became central to anthropology, and, when reworked, to feminist theory (e.g. Irigaray, 1985: 170; Pateman, 1988; Rubin, 1975), and the Hegelian assumptions that he and others advanced remain fundamental in post-structuralism and deconstruction (see, for example, Schrift, 1997; Wyschogrod et al. 2002). Today, wherever you look in sociology and cultural studies, you see the taken-for-granted language of exchange: the subjects, desires, calculations and objects; the power and counter-power; the temporal sequence between giving, receiving and re-ciprocating; the spatial distance between giver and receiver, affirmed and mediated by the movement of objects. Theorists who might once have criticized the individualism of contract theory think nothing of basing their thought on subjectivity and the possibility of inter-subjectivity (Cixous, 1986: 78ff). Social theorists ostensibly talking of the gift unthinkingly switch to talking of gift exchange, insisting that *the free gift is impossible* (e.g. Cixous, 1986: 87; Douglas, 1990: vii) or that *the gift is impossible* (e.g. Derrida, 1994: 12).

To demonstrate the prevalence of exchange assumptions, let us look a little more closely at Derrida's deconstruction of the gift. The gift is impossible, he says, because it is always annulled by the obligation to reciprocate: 'For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt' (Derrida, 1994: 11–12). The aporetic 'paralysis' of the gift in Derrida's account (1994: 28) derives from his Hegelian assumption that gifts necessarily involve desires and intentions: 'There is no gift without the intention of giving' (1994: 123); 'some "one" gives some "thing" to some "one other"' (1994: 11–12):

It supposes a subject and a verb, a constituted subject, which can also be a collective ... a subject identical to itself and conscious of its identity, indeed seeking through the gesture of the gift to constitute its own unity, and, precisely, to get its own identity recognized so that that identity comes back to it. (1994: 11)

While a pure gift, according to Derrida, would elude the world of subjects and objects – 'if there is a gift, it cannot take place between two subjects exchanging objects' (1994: 24) – the Hegelian point of departure makes an alternative ontology impossible. For Derrida, the gift simply must involve desiring subjects, even if this pre-requisite annuls the gift. Thus, he concludes, a 'consistent discourse on the gift becomes impossible' (1994: 24).

Let us return, then, to Lévi-Strauss's story, for underneath its triumphant tone is an anxiety that points to a different reading of the history of social and cultural theory. By basing his succession on Mauss's break from Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss revealed his fear of the ghosts he had imprisoned there. The account of ritual congregation in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* offers important insights into the nature of the meeting, and the nature of the gift, which unsettle the exchange theory of *The*



To see what is repressed within the triumphant view of the gift and exchange, we will look more carefully at the phenomenon of congregation. There are three elements in the common reading of Durkheim that we will specifically reconsider: first, the *conscience collective*; second, the sacred; third, moral forces. We will use stories of meetings by Bohm, Levinas and Buber to show that there are ways to read Durkheim that do not involve the metaphysical reification of society. In doing so, we will acknowledge the important issues raised by Durkheim that have been obscured by exchange logic.

Bohm and dialogue

Let us first take the issue of *conscience collective* and, more generally, the nature of the transformation of consciousness that can occur when people meet. Is it possible to think of this as other than a form of group mind? Must we assume that thinking occurs in either the mind of the individual or the mind of the society (see Buber, 1966: 113)?

Gregory Bateson (1972) queried the assumption of an identifiable subject of thought when he named his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. According to Bateson, mind is an ecological quality because 'mental characteristics are inherent or immanent in the ensemble as a *whole*' (1972: 315). Open-mindedness is ecological, not an oscillation between the defined positions of subjects but the sense of differences within a non-finite network characterized by feedback. Within such a network, each participation is significant, but there is no way of knowing what causes what (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1974). This is a social mind without the metaphysical qualities that Durkheim often attributed to the *conscience collective*.

To explore this possibility, we will look at a meeting story offered by the physicist David Bohm, whose interest in the implicated potential of the whole developed into an interest in dialogue. Identity theory is so prevalent that people frequently assume that 'dialogue' refers to two voices, just as monologue refers to one (see Burbules and Bruce, 2001: 1106). Instead, as Bohm points out, the 'dia' of dialogue primarily indicates 'through'. It points not to exchange but to a non-finite ontology of meeting and relation that cannot be built up from a base of individual identities. Dialogue implies 'a new kind of mind' according to Bohm: one that carries and is carried by those who meet through it (1985: 175; see also Bohm, 1994, 1996, 2004). Dialogue is not located in any or even all of the individual participants, but rather in a whole that is incommensurable with the sum of the finite parts.

Bohm's story concerns a weekend dialogue in which he participated. This began as a finite exchange between subjects and objects, but became a meeting of non-finite ideas that were everyone's and no-one's:



In the beginning, people were expressing fixed positions, which they were tending to defend, but later it became clear that to maintain the feeling of friendship in the group was much more important than to hold any position. Such friendship has an impersonal quality in the sense that its establishment does not depend on a close personal relationship between participants. A new kind of mind thus begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of dialogue ... In this development the group has no pre-established purpose, though at each moment a purpose that is free to change may reveal itself. The group thus begins to engage in a new dynamic relationship in which no speaker is excluded, and in which no particular content is excluded. (Bohm, 1985: 175)

Initially defending positions and identities, people were changed by the realization that what they were doing together was more important than the protection of the self. At that moment, the thinking process that had been hard and dangerous became easy and safe: what people needed in order to unfold still-implicated ideas was effortlessly supplied, without need for the desire to do so. The creativity of the meeting came not from the gifted contributions of this or that subject, but from the grace, the gift, of the non-finite relation in which all participated. It is important to notice, however, that the thought on this weekend was not uniform or group thought. It was characterized by the infinitude of creative potential, rather than the univocality of the finite one. Whereas the self-conscious society can only exist through its exclusion of the other society, there were no exclusions in this meeting, no ideas that were out of bounds.

It is not simply metaphorical to say that the meeting of dialogue opens new worlds and expands minds: our difference as beings allows us to see the world differently. Whereas people who identify with knowledge see the world and others only for what these say about themselves, people who meet in dialogue are able to *hear* the differences offered by others, because they are not personally affronted. Through the play of differences, they are making something that they share with others but which is no-one's personal property. We find ourselves through the difference that others allow us to recognize in ourselves!

Not limited to meetings between people, dialogue refers to any encounter that respects the world's difference (see Hyde, 1979; Murdoch, 1970; Steiner, 1989; Weil, 2002). It follows that real meeting with the world is an effervescent and transformative learning experience and that there is no learning without this meeting with difference. Moreover, if there is no learning, no sense that one experience significantly differs from another, there is no sense of aliveness. As Martin Buber put it, '[a]ll real living is meeting' (Buber, 1958: 11); without meeting, we are alienated from the flow of difference and trapped in the hell of seriality.

110 So let us now return to Durkheim's claim that congregation produces a change in consciousness, allowing people to have thoughts not otherwise



available to them. Bohm's example of dialogue allows us to conceive of this without assuming the existence of a metaphysical Supersubject. It suggests that different thinking arises from different social relations: as social relations change, thinking in congregational settings can shift between non-finite dialogic consciousness, defensively individualistic exchanges and uniform group thought. Dialogic consciousness, however, cannot be produced through the will of any thinking subject, be it the individual or society. It is a state of mind that emerges, but has no efficient cause. It is a gift, there is grace, but there is no exchange between finite giver and receiver.

Levinas and respect

Durkheim characterizes the sacred as an experience of awesome power not found in profane life. We want to emphasize that the experience of awe comes from the respectful relations between participants in the congregation. Respect brings with it a sense of wonder and power and wholeness, but also a sense of vulnerability and destitution. Rather than a sense of the holy that removes us from the everyday, the sacredness of respect returns us to the previously unrecognized truth of the profane. It is not based, therefore, on a principle of transcendence but on a principle of meeting.

The question of face allows us to raise these questions both of Durkheim and of exchange theory. Within the latter, as we have seen, face is seen as identity and desired as self-certainty; it protects like a shield and attacks like a spear. To have someone affirm the objective face you present to the world is to have them accept your claims to being the subject you desire to be. According to Emmanuel Levinas, however, this Hegelian logic is not the logic of the genuinely face-to-face meeting: meeting is a presence that cannot be described in the finite terms of chronology and Euclidean space. Whereas the other in Sartre's park steals the sight of the grass's greenness, in Levinas' meeting the other *gives* sight, including insight, and thereby opens up the truth of this world as if it were a new world (cf. Serres, 1995: 107ff):

You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin ... The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. ... The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute ... there is an essential poverty in the face ... The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill ... The face is ... signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context ... a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son of so-and-so ... Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not 'seen'. It is what cannot become a content, which your



thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond ... But the relation to the face is straightaway ethical. (Levinas and Nemo, 1985: 85–7)

This is not the mirroring of the Hegelian relation, for it leads to a sense of wondrous unfolding and implication rather than a self-certain independence. Moreover, rather than a proof that ‘I’ matter as an autonomous individual, the respect is a sign that *this* matters, this coming together, this meeting with difference, this sense of belonging together as part of an indefinable whole. What matter are the unique parts we play together in an unfolding social process that no-one controls. Humility and awe are present together (cf. Palmer, 1993: 14ff).

When Levinas says ‘you are you’, therefore, he is not associating you-ness with a self-contained identity. The word *you* is like the words *now* and *here*: it indicates a unique presence that can be experienced as a whole but never known as a totality, never defined, contained, represented *in absentia*. Whereas a ‘one’ is always comparable, because there is no number one without a number two, ‘you’ are incomparable. I can only use the word *you* to you, with you, in the course of a meeting with you. It is a participatory word, emerging from meeting, as part of a relationship.

Within the relation Levinas is discussing, the other is at once different from me and the same as me, and there is a mysterious incapacity to say where the boundaries of this sameness and difference fall (see Godbout, 1998: 221). There is a vision but it has a stillness and wholeness not found in an exchange of looks or perspectives. There are no *things* to exchange, no *things* to see. When the relation relies on the logic of the unique or infinite, respect for the other is not respect taken from me but respect for the relation we share. By acknowledging, in wonder, your uniqueness, I find myself accepting my own: you have revealed non-finite potential that was not acknowledged when I thought I knew my identity. By giving you respect, without thought of reward, I have accepted the respect offered by your difference. In so recognizing the face-to-face meeting as an experience of the awesome holiness of the whole, Levinas extends the empirical range of Durkheim’s theory of congregation, moving it into the domain misleadingly called interpersonal (cf. Goffman, 1972: 89).

Levinas’ discussion of infinitude also allows us to draw out a major inconsistency in Durkheim’s account of the sacred. Durkheim often associates the sacred with a sense of unity or totality, a sense of a larger bounded identifiable force; the people in the congregation feel more power because their loyalty to this larger force gives them a new enhanced collective identity. This seems to be his sense when he speaks of religious artefacts as if they are flags representing opposing nations or teams. The renewed strength enjoyed by people is a self-righteousness or self-certainty.

At other times, however, Durkheim refers to the infinite connectedness of a whole, which does not have the boundaries or exclusions of a unity (e.g. Durkheim, 1976: 425–6). In this state, the feelings called out in me by a flag only connect me to the others whose feelings are called out by



different flags. Rather than Euclidean positionality or oppositionality, this sense of open connectedness reveals that all differences are present, here and now, as a sense of potential. This is a holiness, then, that does not take us away but leads us back to the ecological reality of the world as it is everyday. While there is a renewed feeling of belonging, of having a unique and vital part to play, the different spatiality and temporality involve a loss of defensible identity and a loss, too, of clearly marked desires and trajectories. In other words, this is the space of infinitude and the time of the eternal present (see Metcalfe and Game, 2002, 2004). This is a whole that makes itself known through presence but which cannot be represented or expressed.

These different senses of society need to be distinguished. The first sits within finite identity and exchange logic. It is the logic of society as a thing. The latter is the infinite logic of relation, the logic of society as the process of sociality. The former makes worshippers feel stronger and more self-certain; the latter makes them feel awed by a simultaneous sense of potential and vulnerability. In the latter form, the sense of holiness comes from a sense of the whole that undoes the spatiality, temporality and ontology on which exchange relies.

If we reconsider Lévi-Strauss's diners in the light of this discussion, we have two possibilities. If they saw each other through the dialectics of subject and object, they were not really face-to-face. They saw a content, a persona, an identity, and their subsequent conduct was, accordingly, of the exchange type that Lévi-Strauss analyses. Alternatively, if they *were* present to each other, face-to-face, this was a meeting and not an exchange. There was no identification of the other, and no mirroring of self through that other. Wine was poured, but was not offered by a one to another one, from a here to a there, or with a sense of offer now and return later. The person pouring the wine did not do so because of what they had and the other lacked, but because they felt moved by the fundamental vulnerability that all share. They experienced this call as the sacred.

Durkheim emphasizes the moral forces that make themselves known through congregation, assuming that individuals are directed by the moral codes they learn at the religious 'school of collective life' (1976: 423). Levinas' account of the face-to-face meeting, however, suggests a different understanding of moral response. What does he mean when he says that the vulnerability of the face makes it 'straightaway ethical', forbidding us to kill? What is going on when commandment comes from an encounter with weakness? Could it have been this unmediated ethics that led to Lévi-Strauss's diner to 'straightaway' pour his neighbour a glass of wine?

Buber and calling

To consider the question of unmediated ethics, we will look at Martin Buber's notion of calling and response. Buber (1958) calls the face-to-face



meeting an I–Thou relation, while describing the subject–object exchange as an I–It relation. There is a sense of lively and even dreadful happening in the I–Thou encounter, but it is not structured like obedience or desire: ‘The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou* ... No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*’ (1958: 11–12). Responsibility, Buber says, is not a form of masterful control, as the Hegelian tradition assumes, or an obedience, as Durkheim sometimes implies. It is instead the response to the calling heard in the meeting of I and Thou (1966: 20–1). The calling is not, strictly speaking, from the other as an individual: it is from the relation, the whole, the connection. Therefore, while the meeting involves call and response, it is not clear who calls and who responds. The calling that we hear from the needs of the other is the calling that we ourselves find we have needed. By the same token, the authority and commandment in this calling cannot be located in finite terms. It arises from the relation, and therefore from neither of us and both of us.

To help us draw out this point, here is one of Buber’s stories of meeting:

When I was eleven years of age ... I used ... to steal into the stable and gently stroke the neck of my darling, a broad dapple-grey horse. It was not a casual delight but a great, certainly friendly, but also deeply stirring happening. ... When I stroked the mighty mane ... it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of Thou and Thou with me. The horse ... very gently raised his massive head, ears flicking, then snorted quietly, as a conspirator gives a signal meant to be recognizable only by his fellow-conspirator; and I was approved. But once – I do not know what came over the child, at any rate it was childlike enough – it struck me about the stroking, what fun it gave me, and suddenly I became conscious of my hand. The game went on as before, but something had changed ... And the next day, after giving him a rich feed, when I stroked my friend’s head he did not raise his head. A few years later, when I thought back to the incident, I no longer supposed that the animal had noticed my defection. But at the time I considered myself judged. (Buber, 2002: 26–7)

Buber’s meeting with the horse was marked by a sense of presence and holiness that contained within it, he later realized, an awareness of dread commandment. He knew that this relation mattered, and was vulnerable. It would be dreadful not to act accordingly. So without self-conscious thought, he knew what he had to do, what his responsibilities were. This sense of straightaway knowing what is good and what has to be done reminds us of Bohm’s comment about his weekend dialogue: people unselfconsciously became aware that the free flow of dialogue they could feel between them was more important than the defence of their own identities and positions.



The judgement at the end of Buber's story refers to the irresponsible moment, characterized by the logic of I–It, when Buber became a subject acting on desires, thereby treating the horse as his mirror. In disrespecting the horse's otherness, Buber insulted his own. This is neither a subjective judgement, nor one based on the application of powerful, abstract and external moral laws, but is a relational judgement from what Iris Murdoch calls the 'naked' 'for-nothingness' of 'goodness' (1970: 92–3).

This understanding of calling, authority, judgement and goodness indicates that Durkheim did not need to hypothesize a metaphysical 'society' to make sense of the commandment that people feel in congregation. It also allows us to see that the sense of obligation associated with the gift is not necessarily taking place within a Hegelian battle to repay debts and save face. What Murdoch says of the relation to good art could be said of any naked for-nothing relation: 'We surrender ourselves to its authority with a love which is unpossessive and unselfish' (Murdoch, 1970: 92–3).

This form of responsibility allows us a new perspective on the emphasis placed by Durkheim on the role of ritual in congregation. Ritual is an ascetic discipline that, by stilling the desirous self and bringing us into the here and now of presence, can allow us to find what is important and good in life. Ritual is important because it is not something I choose to do: it is not for-anything, and I do not perform it to *get* anything. Instead I give myself up to it, and because I have done so, I am able to receive from it what I did not then know I needed (Godbout, 1998: 219–22).

When someone sits down with me at a restaurant, I am grateful if I have the unselfconscious presence of mind to pour them a glass of wine. The fact that I did not make an arbitrary calculation or choice, or have a purpose in mind, allowed me to be authentically present in this action, and allowed the relation to develop with goodness, grace, depth and vitality. My responsibility is simply to respond. As Buber's story indicates, my faith in this ritual is not an expectation of return but a joy in life and an openness to the difference in the world.

The effervescence of this meeting resembles the experience that Durkheim found in congregation, but it arises from the sociality in the room and not from a metaphysical 'society' outside it. On the other hand, however, this experience of grace and effervescence cannot be reduced to the desires underlying exchanges between subjects. This is gift without subjects and without exchange.

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