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# ‘No Strings Attached’: Welcoming the Existential Gift in Business

*Sandrine Frémeaux and Grant Michelson*

ABSTRACT. Social relations are predominantly influenced by an exchange paradigm whereby the logic of reciprocity shapes behaviour. If the notion of exchange instrumentalism is common across different business disciplines, this does not deny attempts—such as through gift exchange theory—to present different conceptions of traditional exchange-based relations. Gift exchange theory appears promising as it seeks to establish more meaning and significance to the nature and context of exchange relations between human actors or parties. The underlying processes may be different for gift exchange and more traditional economic-based exchanges, but the general outcome remains the same—the obligation of reciprocity between actors. In this article, we develop an alternative conception of social and business experience that transcends the dominant logic of exchange: the existential gift. Firmly embedded in the idea of giving for its own sake, the existential gift suggests that for some individuals the expectations of reciprocity are neither sought nor established. Generosity that is expressed in both tangible and intangible ways need not depend on the response of intended receivers or recipients (e.g. acceptance or non-acceptance) to precipitate future acts of giving. Based on the logic of unconditionality, the existential gift provides human actors with greater freedom in their choices and relationships. It may well be that this freedom, in turn, creates a new ‘ethic of generosity’ whereby significant progress can be made towards developing more human models and practices in business.

KEY WORDS: social relations, gift exchange, reciprocity, existential gift, gratuitousness

## **Introduction**

The logic of reciprocity is the dominant theoretical framework in the analysis of social relations. Reciprocity occurs when some action from a giver evokes a counter response from a recipient or receiver which shows some formal recognition of the giver’s original action. This

response (however measured and interpreted) is the driving force which maintains and sustains human exchanges. Reciprocity also assumes that no exchange relationship between social actors can endure over the long term in a situation of strong asymmetry (Homans, 1958; Gouldner, 1960; Blau, 1964). In other words, the receiver will be obliged to make an appropriate response to the giver. This is not to suggest that the exchange always operates in a symmetrical fashion where every action precipitates an equivalent response in return, but it does indicate that the condition of systematic and consistent imbalance in the relationship cannot be maintained over time. A situation of persistent inequity will harm the relationship (see Adams, 1965).

In the context of business, there are numerous illustrations which draw upon the logic of reciprocity. For example, marketers might give away free samples of their products (gifts) to stimulate future consumer sales; managers can establish the conditions whereby employees display extra-role or citizenship behaviours; government tax incentives can encourage philanthropic donations by firms; and, at the international level, the notion of gift giving is well established when facilitating or building new business relationships. Interpersonal reciprocity in business can also be culturally determined as with the case of *guanxi* in Asian contexts (Provis, 2008). In these and a range of other circumstances, limits are placed on the freedom and choice of actors, whether explicit or implicit, through the creation of obligation to respond in the expected way.

The French sociologist, Mauss (1924; 1967), and more recently Mauss and Halls (2000), refined the analysis of the logic of reciprocity by developing the concept of “gift exchange”. The originality of Mauss’ work lies in not separating the goods and the rites that are the subject of the exchange from the meaning and symbols which are attached to them. By using the concept of “total social phenomenon”, Mauss proposes that the exchange should be considered as a whole. It is the meaning of the logic of gift and reciprocated response (Mauss, 1967), which establishes it as an exchange theory.

Gift exchange theory has attracted considerable attention in different fields of study (e.g. Titmuss, 1971; Moschetti, 1979; Sherry, 1983; Bell, 1991; Ferrary, 2003; Balkin and Richebé, 2007; Falk, 2007; Berthoin Antal and Richebé, 2009; Dodlova and Yudkevich, 2009). As such, it offers one attempt to create more meaning and significance in otherwise more calculative and self-interested exchange relations. This article does not reject the orthodoxy of exchange *per se* as a powerful mechanism in explaining social and business relations. However, it does question whether the logic of reciprocity is sufficient by itself to account for *all* giving-oriented motivations and behaviours. In this context, we envisage a new

concept—the “existential gift”. This concept seeks to establish an additional account of human motivation and behaviour for giving that is not based on exchange.

Unlike social exchange with its obligation of reciprocity, we postulate that under the existential gift perspective the action of giving could itself be sufficient and independent of any expectation of return. Similarly, the receiver can appreciate that the gift is given freely and without condition (“no strings attached”). For both the giver and receiver the existential gift perspective does not curtail or limit their freedom and choice. On the contrary, because the obligation of reciprocity is not established, both actors have greater freedom in their choices. And it is this freedom, among other factors, which helps create the potential for identifying more promising human models in business which the current crisis might suggest.<sup>1</sup> If the business of business is indeed the human person as Sandelands (2009) has argued, then the existential gift could help explain more of what it is to be human.

The structure of the article is as follows. In the second section we examine the idea of social exchange in general and gift exchange in particular. Attention is then drawn in the third section to some of the extant limitations in these approaches (e.g. calculative orientation, focused on receiving back). The fourth section presents a new theoretical possibility for understanding action: the existential gift. We show that unconditionality and freedom can lie at the core of this additional approach. The implications of the existential gift for both business research and practice are then discussed. Concluding remarks are drawn in the final section.

### **The social exchange and gift exchange perspectives**

The notion of exchange forming the basis of human interactions is a longstanding and enduring one. Indeed, in a seminal contribution Homans (1958, p. 606) contended that:

Social behavior is an exchange of goods, material goods but also non-material ones, such as the symbols of approval or prestige. Persons that give much to others try to get much from them, and persons that get much from others are under pressure to give much to them. This process of influence tends to work out at equilibrium to a balance in the exchanges. For a person in an exchange, what he gives may be a cost to him, just as what he gets may be a reward, and his behavior changes less as the difference of the two, profit, tends to a maximum.

Such social exchange with its underlying elements of dependency and power assumes rational choice for action—with its subjective assessment of costs and benefits—and lies at the centre of human relationships. As Homans and others have noted, the result of such resource exchanges (material and non-material) can lead to profits, value, rewards, status, approval, reputation, trust and flexibility, among other outcomes. Social exchange theory exerts considerable influence in both general and business contexts (e.g. Akerlof, 1982; Miczo, 2002; 2008; Chen and Choi, 2005; Berry, 2007; Sanyal et al., 2007).

The idea of exchanging resources logically invokes the action of reciprocity. That is, when one actor (A) gives something to a different actor (B), then actor (B) is obliged to reciprocate or respond in the appropriate and often pre-determined way. For instance, the amount of money exchanged for a good or service must be commensurate with the perceived value of the good or service. Agreement about the value or utility of the exchange is typically necessary in order for any exchange to occur in the first place. Of course, there may not be agreement in some cases about the value of the exchange: for example, actor (B) inflates dramatically the usual price for the good or service required by actor (A) and there are no alternative or better options for actor (A). This does not mean that an exchange will not occur, but it can mean that the in-kind response is subsequently judged as incommensurate, inadequate and unfair. This condition of disequilibrium or asymmetry could then jeopardise future exchanges between these particular actors. In effect, reciprocity assumes that no exchange relation can survive over the long term in a situation of strong imbalance or asymmetry (Gouldner, 1960; Blau, 1964). It is not that the resource exchange has to be symmetrical on every occasion but a perpetual state of asymmetry cannot be sustained.

It is relatively easy to see how social exchange, when interpreted along material or economic lines, can reduce human interactions and relationships to a more rationalised process. It is also possible that due to its more calculative and utilitarian approach, material exchanges do little to establish enduring trust relations between actors since the nature of the in-kind response is expected shortly after the initial exchange is made. Consequently, the type of relationship that is established between the exchange actors tends to be impersonal and based on self interest (Balkin and Richebé, 2007, p. 56). It may also be the case that social exchanges at the individual level can undermine wider collective and societal interests.

Notwithstanding the high level of importance attached to the rationalised and economically interested aspects of social exchange theory, there are alternative accounts that are not based on a strictly cost-benefit type analysis. There is a long tradition dating back to the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, that shows human actors can form

relationships in order to pursue a common goal (Rousseau, 1762). The relational quality and continuity depends on how the actors work together to achieve their common good (Miczo, 2002). Further, and what is significant for present purposes, is the work of the French sociologist, Marcel Mauss.

In a number of contributions (e.g. Mauss, 1924; 1967) and more recently with Halls (Mauss and Halls, 2000), Mauss redefined the logic of reciprocity by developing the concept of “gift exchange”, also known as “reciprocal gift”. The originality of this work lies in not separating the goods and the rites that are the subject of the exchange from the meaning and symbols which are attached to them. By using the concept of “total social phenomenon”, Mauss argues that the exchange relationship should be considered in its entirety. This means that gift exchange is intended to capture the sense of developing social relations/attachment beyond the mere calculative exchange of resources. The point about gift exchange lies in its sustaining social relationships between different human actors rather than focusing on the actual resources being exchanged. Seen in this way, gift exchange might function as a binding social practice (Verhezen, 2009), since the time horizon anticipated for the relationship is indefinite.

To further support this concept of “total social phenomenon”, it is important to understand an idea drawn from Bourdieu (1980)—the “taboo of calculus”. The explicit desire by the giver for a reciprocated gift is taboo. Moreover, part of this taboo stems from non-disclosure of the value of what is either “given” or “owed” to the other actor. Violating this taboo of calculus (e.g. giving voice to the current state of asymmetry or imbalance in the relation as perceived by one of the actors) will undermine the gift exchange relationship (Mauss, 1967). In fact, gift exchange lets the recipient fix an adequate repayment depending on their resources (Belk, 1979). Balkin and Richebé (2007, p. 57) provide the illustration of an employee request for general training which does not contain an explicit request by the employer on how the time spent away from work (lost productivity) will be made up. These authors posit that the scope of flexibility offered by the employer will engender the feeling of care which, at some future point, results in the employee reciprocating in a way that will benefit the employer. Thus, the taboo of calculus also extends to not disclosing the timeframe over which a reciprocated response is expected.

In theoretical terms, the gift exchange perspective is intended to develop mutual respect and personal trust between actors as the resources shared are more likely to involve non-material and intangible ones compared with simply economic-based exchanges. The argument is that the gift exchange perspective can help overcome the shortcomings of

orthodox understandings of social exchange with its impersonal, short term, and self-interested focus.

The gift exchange perspective has been widely examined across a number of different fields including donations to charitable organisations (Falk, 2007), employee training (Balkin and Richebé, 2007), volunteering behaviours (Booth et al., 2009), social capital (Dolfsma et al., 2009), knowledge sharing (Berthoin Antal and Richebé, 2009), and employee work effort (Gneezy and List, 2006; Pereira et al., 2006). Taking the last of these as an illustration, it is important to note that gift exchange can operate beyond two-actor relationships to include multiple actors. For example, groups of employees tend to repay higher wages with more effort (Maximiano et al., 2007). While it has seldom been explicitly examined through a gift exchange lens, the idea of organisational citizenship behaviour (e.g. Bateman and Organ, 1983; Konovsky and Pugh, 1994) can also be consistent with gift exchange where employer actions have precipitated such behaviours.

It appears that the gift exchange view presents a different depiction of the exchange relation. On closer inspection, however, it is observed that while the characteristics and processes of gift and economic/utilitarian type exchanges are indeed posited as different (see also Gregory, 1982), the general outcome remains the same—the norm or obligation of reciprocity. Therefore, the underlying logic of the gift and counter gift/response does not prohibit the norm of reciprocity and in fact it is this logic (Mauss, 1967; Derrida, 1992; Durkheim, 1996), which clearly positions gift exchange as an exchange-based theory. Indeed, this behavioural norm can be a manifestation of it since the giver can expect (albeit at an unspecified future time and by undisclosed means) a benevolent attention from the receiver in return (Blau, 1964).

In a gift exchange perspective, gift affects the happiness or the satisfaction of the recipient (Poe, 1977). It is basically impossible for the recipient to refuse a gift, because to do so would be tantamount to violating social norms (Sherry, 1983; Ferrary, 2003; Roster, 2006). It is also inconceivable for the recipient not to try to give back a gift of similar value: gift giving is perceived as an affirmation of power and selfhood (Schwartz, 1967), so that the recipient who does not give back would experience a feeling of inferiority (Sherry, 1983) or dependency (Moschetti, 1979). This explains why the recipient searches for equilibrium and provides the same utility to the donor (Bell, 1991). Both the giver and recipient cannot accept an asymmetrical relationship over the long term.

However, we question whether the logic of reciprocity is sufficient to give deeper meaning to human actions in social and business relations. The following discussion seeks to briefly examine the limitations of reciprocity in the context of gift exchange.

### **The limits of the norm of reciprocity in gift exchange theory**

As noted in the introduction, the obligation of reciprocity remains the dominant paradigm for the analysis of social (and business) relations. This logic is still evident in gift exchange even if the intention is to sustain more meaningful and enduring relationships. Because of this intention, it is further assumed that gift exchange is superior to economic-based exchange which is more utilitarian and short term oriented. However, this de-emphasises the ability of economic exchanges to develop human relations. Direct economic exchanges where value is well-defined are not always impersonal and detached (as suggested by gift exchange) but can aim at creating social relationships and mutual respect. The example of the “regular” customer in a café could be a case in point. In many circumstances, such customers can become familiar to the owners and an exchange beyond money-for-coffee can occur. Unsurprisingly, the posited superiority of gift exchange to economic type exchange is also questioned by some economists. Bell (1991) has shown that if gift exchange differs from commodity exchange in terms of the rules/processes that characterise equilibrium relations, the resulting exchange ratios still appear to be similar.

In addition to the actual reciprocated benefits under gift exchange, Camerer (1988) insists on the relational dimension by specifying that gifts serve as signals of intention of future investment in the relationship. The critique here is not about disputing the potential of reciprocity as a material or rhetorical gesture in social communication (Schieffelin, 1980), but with specifying, in a normative sense, that the purpose of gift giving is only about sustaining meaningful relationships through exchange. Taken at face value, the idea of a gift is simply that; something that is surprising, unexpected, and to be received. Making a gift (tangible or otherwise) to a stranger or someone whom you do not expect to develop a relationship with cannot ostensibly occur within gift exchange. It would generally be inconceivable to suggest that the few coins and/or smile of acknowledgement given to a homeless person on the street are offered because there is a desire for reciprocity. Rather, such actions are likely underpinned by a motivation to give something for its own sake. In this example, the idea about being free to help others’ who might be less fortunate than ourselves is arguably a



deeper sense of human relationships than one aimed at achieving the same objective but through establishing an obligation.<sup>2</sup>

In the model constructed by Sherry (1983), the gift giving process can be divided into three stages: gestation, which incorporates all facets of the exchange prior to the actual gift exchange; prestation, which involves all ritualistic and interpersonal dynamics of the exchange itself; and reformulation, in which both parties reflect on gift outcomes. The recipient's behaviours at these different stages are perceived by the giver as indicators of relationship health and quality. To reciprocate fairly, the recipient has to learn about the context of the giver to estimate the effort s/he has made. While the "taboo of calculus" is clear (Bourdieu, 1980), it nonetheless raises the spectre of uncertainty concerning such questions as what is likely to be perceived by the other actor as a sufficient response, and when should this response occur. The explicit taboo on giving voice to these issues is likely to result in their being internalised, thereby creating implicit tension in the building of trust. By keeping tacit the "taboo of calculus", just how actors in gift exchange would deal with gift failure is seldom addressed (see Roster, 2006). Ambivalence, envy and negativity in gift exchange can therefore periodically emerge. Sherry et al. (1993), for example, have found that gift giving and receiving can lead to high levels of anxiety.

It remains that gift exchange is still a theory of reciprocity: if the giver takes the risk of not receiving any "compensation" or return, then compensation remains the main motivation for the initial gift. From this point of view, the givers' claim to give freely and disinterestedly is an illusion, because the gift will be compensated at a later date. Failure to respond or return a counter-gift will jeopardise the relationship. As Gouldner (1960) argued, any gratuitousness is illusory because the gift is embedded in a complex reciprocal exchange system.

In addition to the assumption of reciprocity within gift exchange, other theories also articulate the relationship between the individual and the organisation as a series of exchanges and reciprocal expectations (Homans, 1958; Gouldner, 1960). For instance, process-based motivation theories highlight the cognitive process of perceptions of the possible results of the action (valence), the foreseeable consequences of the results (instrumentality) and the perceived link between effort and performance (expectancy). Other formulations have complemented these approaches. Equity theory, for example, establishes that a position of imbalance in the exchange of inputs and outputs will motivate a person to take action to reduce it (Adams, 1965), while the experience of dissonance between attitudes and behaviours can provoke action to reduce the anxiety (Festinger, 1957). What these theories all have in common is that a state of disequilibrium or asymmetry will precipitate behaviours intended to

return to the desired position (equilibrium). They are designed to make instrumentality (and exchange) the central and growing reference of the organised action.

However, we contend that instrumental action is neither exhaustive nor self-sufficient. It cannot find in itself the meaning to justify it. Undoubtedly, performing an action for a given purpose may make sense, on the condition that the purpose is sufficient in itself. But if this purpose is again a means whose meaning comes from another purpose, the rationality of instrumental action is nothing but apparent. Instrumentality cannot give meaning to the action. It therefore becomes necessary to wander from the logic of obtaining. Is it possible to consider non-instrumental and non-exchange depictions of giving? We now turn to address this question.

### **New possibilities for action: The existential gift**

There is growing empirical evidence that not all giving behaviour is based exclusively on the logic of reciprocity. At the societal level, studies on patterns of giving have revealed “sacrificial” giving whereby the giving occurs at some significant personal cost (Cowley et al., 2004; Everatt et al., 2005). In such cases, there appears to be little expectation of return and while there may be a personal relationship between the different actors, this is by no means assured. Giving still occurs in the absence of establishing any exchange relationship between different actors. Examples of this might include anonymous gifts of money, and body organ donations by families of deceased members. This begs an important question: why do human actors persist in giving when there is no return or exchange?

It seems that the social exchange and gift exchange perspectives are unable to adequately address this question and we contend there is a need to consider alternative frameworks to account for giving material (tangible) or non-material (intangible) resources. Caillé and Godbout (1992) have demonstrated that gifts give meaning when the action of giving is done for its own sake and is the end itself. For us, this helps to define existential gift; the giver will not expect returns or a counter/reciprocated gift. Thus, no record or “account” of giving is kept. What differentiates the logic of existential gift from the exchange logic is the lack of right, guarantee and hope to profit of any kind. Existential gift is disconnected from calculation and intent (Godbout, 2000, p.12). Existential gift can thus be defined as: “giving which has no other objective/purpose than the giving itself, meaning that for the giver there is no expectation of return; for the recipient or receiver there is no obligation to

reciprocate”. It is possible of course that a return may exist since a gift does not exclude a later narcissist benefit. In addition, existential gift does not mean a lack of interest or pleasure. But any pleasure, satisfaction or gratification derived is only the indirect result of actions that had not given this objective as their primary purpose.

Because existential gift is not part of any exchange, we consider it provides one means by which the instrumental view of business can be transcended (see also Melé, 2003a; Giovanola, 2009). Some scholars have even linked this to the term “agape” employed in Christian theology which refers to the love of/from God meaning unconditional, self-sacrificing, initiating, volitional, consuming, desirable love (Belk and Coon, 1993). Giving may create deeper meaning to relations regardless of any expectation, even if the recipient does not always understand why a person decides to act beyond what is normally expected. Indeed, from the recipient or receiver’s view, the gift does not necessarily become a symbolic reminder of the power, economic and social differences between the actors as no obligation to reciprocate is established. In this way, it has the potential of establishing more genuine interpersonal relations and solidarity between human actors.

Whether such theological ideas as “agape” are indeed appropriate in the field of business has attracted debate. For example, De George (1986) broadly questioned whether philosophers could learn much from religious writers and their methods that would add value to the field of business ethics. Not surprisingly, agape was excluded from his analysis on the basis it is supererogatory—or quite literally superfluous—since it entails doing more than one’s duty or is necessary (De George, 1986, p. 428). Unlike Kantian or rule utilitarian approaches with their general rules to guide actions, he saw agape as something vague and imprecise because it provided no general rules and also because there was uncertainty over how it deals with the issue of obligation. However, in a response article Williams (1986) challenged this “separation thesis” between philosophy and theology, arguing that a narrative understanding of agape (rather than principles or rules) can lead individuals towards innovative actions. Integrating reason and revelation (through narrative accounts) can therefore be complementary and permit both a recognition and justification of actions to be taken. It is the recognition that something needs addressing in the first place which provides the distinctive contribution of theological as opposed to philosophical business ethics (Williams, 1986, p. 480). We consider with others (e.g. Fort, 1997), there is theoretical space for different groups to contribute to the development of business ethics and that inclusion, rather than exclusion, of different perspectives can enhance this agenda.

In many ways, the idea of agape (insofar as it relates to the existential gift) in business is closely related to an emphasis on virtue and character, as commonly associated with Aristotle's moral philosophy. Without an account of different virtues such as compassion and justice for instance, it is difficult to even conceive that moral dilemmas would even be identified in the first place. Therefore: "theories of obligation need a context, a vision of what constitutes the good life" (Williams, 1986, p. 482). And this is precisely where theological and religious insights can contribute towards this role (see also Roussouw, 1994; Kim et al., 2009). Of course, a well known objection to virtue ethics is that it does not focus on what types of actions are morally permitted and which actions are not. This criticism is not our concern as we seek to avoid establishing any sense of obligation with the existential gift. This would be theoretically inconsistent with its central tenets.

In the moral literature, the notion of altruism as highlighting an unselfish concern for the welfare of others' should also be briefly considered in the present discussion. However, to the extent that the ethical doctrine of altruism imposes a moral obligation on individuals to benefit other people, this is inconsistent with existential gift. Further, we do not consider altruism as synonymous with existential gift because the former can sometimes be impersonal and non-relational. Consequently, this can result on occasion in self interested actions which are calculative and designed to secure benefits for the giver over time (Trivers, 1971; Andreoni, 1990). This outcome is not the objective of existential gift.

Because existential gift is not easily understandable, the givers do not feel the need to explain their experiences. It is not the desire to display the good they have done, but an intimate and unintelligible action, which leads them to experience existential gift. The enthusiasm and delight may in fact surprise the giver who might not always be aware of the reasons for their actions. Consequently, this means, contrary to Schwartz (1967), that giver self-identity and self-esteem is not contingent on gift acceptance or rejection. The action of giving is sufficient. It is when human actors focus only on reciprocity that weariness in giving can occur. Doing good for its own sake will produce enduring results.<sup>3</sup>

Existential gift is not only extra-ordinary with respect to recipient expectations, it is also experienced by the givers themselves as an adventure that enables them to go beyond or expand on what they normally do. Existential gift takes the shape of new and creative initiatives. Thus, one characteristic of the existential gift is that human actors can continually take the initiative (agape), without risking disappointment that the gratuitousness will not be recognised or returned in some way because reciprocity is unimportant. Related to this, the nature of the existential gift does not necessarily require lengthy contemplation or reflection

as could occur with gift exchange due to its aspiration to initiate the dynamic of exchange (Ferrary, 2003, p. 131). Rather, existential gift can be spontaneous, random, unpredictable, and serving, for instance.

This fundamentally means that existential gift is truly free. A compulsory or binding gift would no longer be a gift, but potentially a burden (of obligation). Existential gift means that the giver is free to give and the receiver is free to welcome or not (Caillé and Godbout, 1992). It presupposes a consciousness in that the giver chooses the action they want to accomplish. They have a non-normative approach in so far as they do not try to comply with the prescribed standards. Seen in this light, the gift is not an intention, calculation, morality, nor an ideal or an action without causes. Existential gift enables the giver to be who s/he is and not what others' expect her/him to be. Existential gift is a gift of being. It also does not reject questions of equity with an interest in others' but transcends commutative justice with its requirement for reciprocity. The individual gives himself or herself because, in order "to be", they need to be free to give. It might appear there is a mystery which surrounds the gift conceptualised in this way, but the distinction between actions of gratuitousness and giving in order to receive (the exchange logic) is unequivocal (see Benedict XVI, 2009, section 39).

A summary of the two gift perspectives—gift exchange and existential gift—is shown in Figure 1 and Table 1 below. Although the gift exchange perspective shows that a calculative and instrumental gift is taboo, it nonetheless remains a rational view of the relationship.

Insert Figure 1 and Table 1 about here
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**Discussion**

There is a risk in considering that the concept of existential gift as a reality, while certainly enlightening and interesting, is impossible and beyond reach for business relations and practice. It is almost as if the domains of business and existential gift occupy two very distinct spaces. However, we do not exclude the possibility that existential gift could operate in business by individuals. If we consider this a reasonable proposition then it is also coherent with the possibility that business and other organisations can become more humanising as the

meaning of social relationships changes (Melé, 2003b). While it may prove difficult to establish an existential gift theory if there are no falsification criteria (Popper, 1972), this does not mean the behaviour does not occur among some human actors in business and other settings.

As long as individuals seek to be free to give themselves, it becomes meaningful to welcome the existential gift. In business contexts, this can imply changes which might have a positive impact. First, if organisations recognise existential gift as a practical reality, they could more easily be liberated from a system based exclusively on explicit/overt control. It could help businesses understand better the importance of working with all its stakeholders in ways that take into account the human condition and needs. Second, by welcoming the existential gift business and other organisations do not risk discouraging giving and other acts of generosity by rewarding only those which can systematically be calculated. This means that there would be recognition of the importance of the “whole” person which often includes (hidden) behaviours without which organisations would not survive. Such behaviours include information transfer, benevolence in collective work, and other sharing activities, for example.

It is not our argument that existential gift should replace gift exchange theory in business; rather, it can complement it, or even give a deeper meaning to it. In the same way that Mauss did not see gift exchange and market exchange as incompatible, we do not see gift exchange and existential gift as incompatible. In the first analysis, gift exchange is what enables market exchange to occur. Existential gift can be precisely what gives more meaning to gift exchange. Considering the sole logic of reciprocity and obligation may cause misunderstandings. Not only can the recipients (managers, employees, suppliers, customers and so on) not refuse gifts in a reciprocal exchange logic (otherwise there are consequences), but they also can welcome (or not) existential gift. Herein is where the trouble potentially lies: it might be very difficult in practice for human actors to welcome existential gift if their notion of obligation for any initial action remains very strong. Referring to the situation of moving house, Marcoux (2009) has carefully demonstrated how people can prefer market-based exchanges because of a sense of social indebtedness incurred under other approaches.

Because there is no “taboo of calculus” or concern among actors about giving any indication that the gift—counter gift was unsuitable or incommensurate, human actors can enjoy more freedom by being less constrained by social norms. In the logic of existential gift, it is possible to create or to enhance an imbalanced relationship. This could appear irrational and unexpected, but it is possible, merely because welcoming a gift without reciprocating or

giving a gift without expecting a return gives a deeper meaning to social relations. Receiving a gift is no more an affirmation of selfhood or power. It can become a way of experiencing a sense of transcendency for managers, employees, suppliers, customers, citizens etc.

In this perspective, it may be relevant to admit the possibility of existential gift in broader social relations. If individuals are no longer afraid of being in a position of vulnerability or weakness, they can abandon any reference to reciprocal exchange and disclose their experiences of existential gift, which would be the true or authentic reason for their actions.

We anticipate in future attempts to narrate and better understand existential gift with its unconditional logic,<sup>4</sup> that researchers and business practitioners will be confronted with a difficulty: how can one adequately demonstrate that existential gift behaviour is not merely a sequence of the exchange logic of gift-counter gift? For example, gift recipients or receivers could mis-interpret the gratuitousness as an attempt to create an obligation to reciprocate. Dumond (2007) has also demonstrated that the various forms of existential gift can be perceived as transaction or as a submission to a norm. Here, self-giving can be re-interpreted by the giver or a third party as careerism in a transactional view or as minimal service in a normative view. We can often detect an additional interest in all benevolent initiatives. In drawing attention to this problematic we nonetheless remain confident that the concept of existential gift does have relevance for business.

A further point of consideration is time. In the short term, it may not be possible to assert that individual or corporate actions are unequivocally existential gift (as opposed to gift exchange). But in the long term, if the asymmetry persists or endures, these could increase our confidence in the existential gift concept. This suggests, assuming that existential gift can be empirically demonstrated, that longitudinal accounts which are qualitative-based inquiries might be a useful starting point. We are not opposed to other possibilities including experimental design. Earlier attempts to measure “pure” altruism in this way have proved useful (e.g. Cialdini et al., 1987).<sup>5</sup>

### *Further research*

The idea of existential gift could provoke new scope and direction for a range of different fields of studies, including business ethics and philosophy. First, how might existential gift be utilised to disarm or neutralise the association that often emerges between gift giving, bribes

and other “incentives” designed to procure valued returns in national and international business? Second, in the area of individual and corporate philanthropy which typically examines the association between the donations and returns (direct and indirect) to the giver, there is scope to examine how existential gift might re-focus research directions. This might include looking more carefully at the conditions under which giving operates for its own sake. In addition, there appears to be something of a paradox when companies highlight their gratuitousness via annual reports. Can it be relevant to define corporate giving as existential gift even if the disclosure is required under different regulatory requirements? At face value, there would be an inversion of meanings, insofar as the gift is no longer what makes it possible to be, but what gives rise to external recognition. Third, in human resource management (HRM) employees as givers or as recipients could bear witness to experiences of existential gift that give deeper meaning to work and interpersonal relations. As givers, employees could take pleasure in the existential gift; as recipients they could take pleasure in experiencing the existential gift. There may also be particular types of firms or industry sectors where the existential gift has more resonance. Perhaps it might be easier to notice narrations and examples of existential gift in public service organisations and in the community sector. Employees of public service or non-government organisations might be particularly sensitive to the notion of helping and giving services for others’. Fourth, there is further scope to extend the idea of existential gift in marketing studies as alluded to by Belk and Coon (1993) in their important work on agapic giving in this field.

The above list is necessarily selective and is not exhaustive by any means. The following research questions would therefore be useful to help direct future lines of inquiry:

- How prevalent is the concept of existential gift in business and society?
- Does the occurrence of existential gift vary across different national settings, industry sectors and organisations? If so, why?
- In what ways might the existential gift evoke new initiatives of gratuitousness and meaningful relations in business and society?
- How does the existential gift operate inside organisations? What tensions and complementarities exist between this and the exchange perspective?
- Can a theory of the existential gift be developed and operationalised?
- What effects does the existential gift have on internal and external stakeholders of business and other organisations?



- To what extent can business and other organisations as entities practice the existential gift or does this occur only through human agency?
- In what ways does existential gift create positive and negative outcomes for individuals and business?

## Conclusion

The idea of resource exchange (material and non-material) based on utility is widely acknowledged as a powerful analytical framework in business relations. Different variations around this theme have emerged whereby authors such as Mauss have suggested the notion of gift exchange—which questions whether all human motivations and interactions are to be interpreted in broadly economic terms. Gift exchange theory reminds us that exchange is not only financial, but also symbolic and social, and that compensation of the gift is not immediate, certain and explicit, but informal (Ferrary, 2003). The mutual expectations of reciprocity must remain tacit. However, by retaining the same underlying logic of reciprocity with an emphasis on obligation nonetheless suggests some ambiguity of gift giving and gratuitousness in different settings (see Verhezen, 2009). While presented otherwise, gift exchange does appear somewhat manipulative and raises the question of whether the moral obligation to reciprocate is moral/ethical?

In this article, we sought to question whether the logic of reciprocity is sufficient by itself to account for all acts of giving. In doing so, our objective was to postulate whether alternative conceptions of giving could also operate *in addition to* the dominant exchange logic and to this end, we offer the notion of existential gift. The position adopted recognises the diverse ways in which giving is manifest by people and the multiple purposes served by gifts (Komter, 2007).

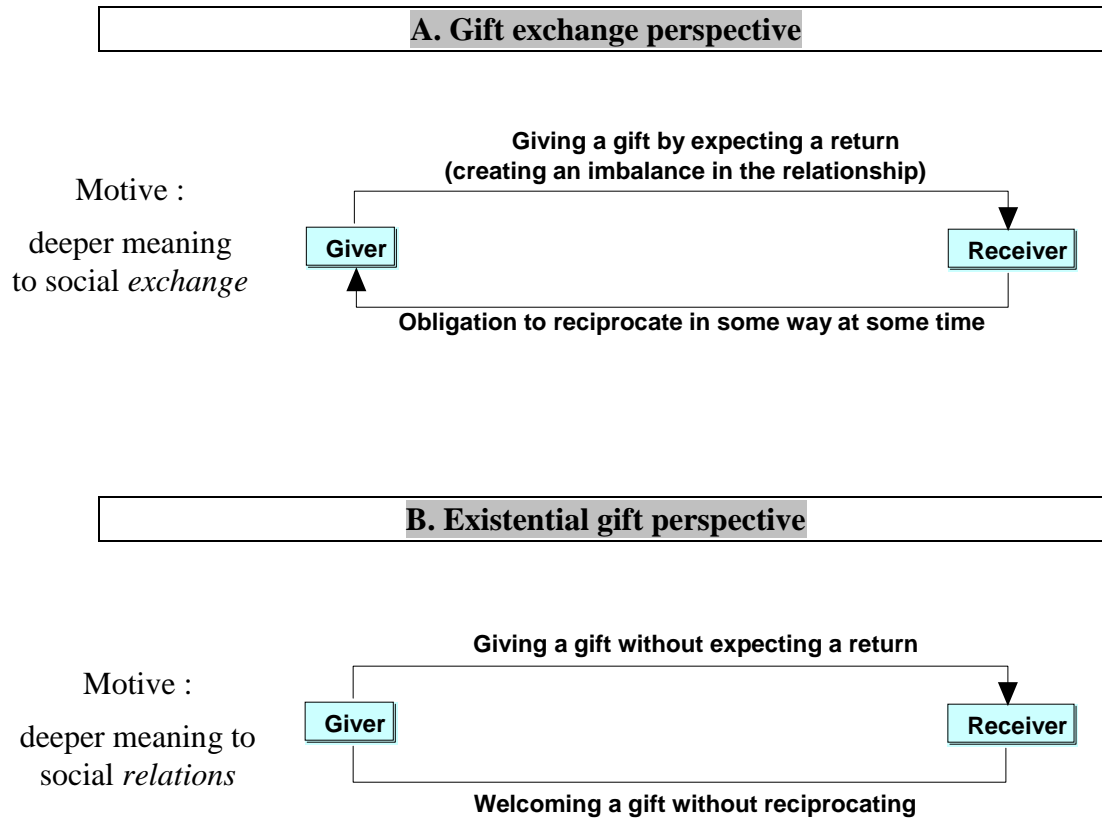
Disconnected from any expectation of return (logic of unconditionality), the existential gift can explain the behaviour of giving by some social actors. Because it seeks to provide such actors with greater freedom and choice in their behaviours it is argued that the existential gift can help engender a more authentic “ethic of generosity”. The logic of existential gift is not premised on giving in order to receive. Consequently, this can permit greater exercise of choice to transcend expectation. If there is any “expectation” surrounding the existential gift it is to give/serve without necessarily seeking a return. The intended receiver is free to welcome (or not) the gift. But importantly, any rejection of the gift remains independent of future acts

of existential gift by the giver. It is therefore correct to state that such giving is asymmetrical but this is the point of existential gift. The possibility of maintaining disequilibrium over time is a characteristic of existential gift but this is what makes it unique and of theoretical and practical interest. It establishes a deeper and more embodied meaning to giving than one designed to create obligation.

By proposing the concept of existential gift, this article has attempted to go beyond an (almost exclusively) instrumental view of giving behaviour in social and business relations. Giving *for its own sake* with “no strings attached” presents an opportunity to provide deeper and more enduring meaning to a wide range of social and business relations. Nonetheless, there is a temptation to believe that the possibility of an existential gift is beyond reach: it is as if we are being asked to go from being “too inhuman” (giving based on expectations of obliged reciprocity) to being “too human” (giving as an act of authentic generosity). Although a notoriously difficult task to prove, it may nonetheless be possible that the existential gift lies more at the centre of what it is to be human and understandable of all that is human than the gift—counter gift logic.

## Figure 1: The Two Gift Perspectives

The same behaviour can be interpreted in two ways:



**Table 1: Comparison Between Gift Exchange and Existential Gift**

Characteristics of gift	Gift exchange theory	Existential gift perspective
Objective dimension	Impossibility of maintaining a state of asymmetry over time	Possibility of maintaining a state of asymmetry over time
Subjective dimension	<p><i>Purpose</i></p> <p>To give meaning to exchange</p> <p><i>Experience/feeling</i></p> <p>Expectation/obligation to return</p> <p>Calculation is taboo</p> <p>Feeling of dependency</p> <p>Obligation to welcome the gift</p> <p><i>Social representation</i></p> <p>Business perceived as a system of reciprocal exchanges</p>	<p><i>Purpose</i></p> <p>To give meaning to life/relations</p> <p><i>Experience/feeling</i></p> <p>No expectation/obligation to return</p> <p>No calculation</p> <p>Feeling of freedom</p> <p>Freedom to welcome (or not) the gift</p> <p><i>Social representation</i></p> <p>Business perceived as a place for mutual relations</p>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes *an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future*” (Benedict XVI, 2009, section 21).

<sup>2</sup> While we are conscious of our own personal convictions, there is no presumption that the objective of searching for deeper and more meaningful human relationships is exclusive to one world view or religious perspective.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Bible: “And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart” (Galatians 6: 9, Bible, Revised Standard Version), although the context refers it to the eternal life.

<sup>4</sup> Although based on the logic of unconditionality, the existential gift provides a deeper meaning to that logic. We recognise that as the *unconditional gift* is the main tangible dimension of *existential gift*, the latter can reveal more than the former in the sense that “to be” and give meaning to social relations and life, persons need to be free to give *themselves*.

<sup>5</sup> We thank Sebastien Fosse, IE Business School, Madrid, for directing us to this source.

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