

Prologue: *Donations or Bribes?*

There seems to be an obvious consensus that bribery is always perceived as morally 'wrong' and that philanthropy is usually characterized as 'good'. Bribery and corporate philanthropy are concrete expressions of gift practices in business; one as a morally deplorable and unacceptable behavior, the other as a morally enlightened example of what can be perceived as corporate social responsibility. So why bother? Well, for ages both bribery and philanthropy find their roots in old gift practices that have been the basis for bonding and binding social and business groups in most traditional cultures for ages. However, the ambiguity of the gift has made it possible to disguise bribes *as if* it were gifts and to elevate corporate philanthropy to the status of enlightened social responsible business practices. The following philosophical analysis aims to elaborate upon this ambiguity and indicate that gifts and donations are not always what they seem to be at first instance.

Is a gift an act of generosity or is it rather a social obligation? Are these gifts meant to express one's recognition of the other person or are they useful tools to sustain or even manipulate social relationships? This research is driven by a moral appeal to react against the unfairness of corruption that harms society at large. Confronted with the malaise of destructive corruption and bribery as one of the major diseases jeopardizing the welfare and well-being of many people in developing countries, one could ask oneself what can and should be done. Living in a part of the world where discretion and disguise seem to be at once a game and part of the culture, one is often confronted with a clash of moral values. Gift-giving practices are so deeply embedded in Asian cultures that some are hardly able (or willing) to distinguish gifts from bribes. In Asia, quite often business people use gift practices to influence the decisions of government officials. Moreover, in quite a number of cases, gift practices are exploited blatantly to cover up less benevolent behavior. This analysis reflects upon the problem of greed

and bribery in a multi-cultural global world by focusing on the *logic of the gift*. Emphasizing the ambiguity of gift practices will reveal the overlapping characteristics between gifts and bribes and how it potentially can transgress into bribery. Nonetheless, this book aims to provide a clear overview of criteria to distinguish gifts from bribes. Similarly, philanthropy is often more ambiguous than it appears on the surface. Corporate donations intend to (presumably) promote corporate social responsibility in an international business environment in which reputation and corporate image can be lost with one manipulative stroke of a business executive.

Common ethical ideas are the result of a complex web of many different traditions and social forces, shaped by conceptual representations of history. Despite some historical and cultural contingency of ethical ideas and values, the consistency of a logic of the gift across cultures and even across historical traditions is quite conclusive: in other words the importance of gift practices and its conceptual meaning seems to be universally valid. What is less clear is the moral interpretation of the precise substantial content of certain gift practices. The content of an alleged gift is not always clear and may need to be determined by its contextuality.

The notion that bribery is evil apparently does not prevent it from occurring. Moreover, it does not prevent it from spreading in some countries. What forces and factors could reverse such a trend? Selfishness has its limits whereas rules and virtues could guide and support a moral order, guarded by fairly functioning institutions.

The hypothesis of this research is twofold:

1. Social interaction and social pacts are characterized by the principle of *reciprocity*. This principle of reciprocity is at the roots of social and personal recognition and relations. Facilitating and maintaining social interaction through gift practices remains, nevertheless, *ambiguous* which explains possible shifts and transgressions in meaning. The principle of reciprocity, however, is *in se* initiated by an asymmetrical or *unilateral* (often generous) gift. The logic of reciprocity finds its generic roots in the notion of abundance.
2. Although reciprocity is fundamental for any personal relationship and social interaction, it can be misused for less benevolent purposes.

Because of an inherent ambiguity, the gift can deviate into a logic of strict equivalence. Such reciprocal gift can (1) potentially fall into the trap of an *alleged gift* that is often justified by the elite in power or officials as ‘culturally’ acceptable – often the beginning of a vicious and destructive involvement in bribery (trying to disguise its immoral and a-social character), or it can be (2) elevated to some corporate social responsible behavior, often expressed in the form of corporate philanthropy or donations. Claiming to give away some of its profits for the good of the community hereby guaranteeing its license to operate within that community.

This book is divided in a *conceptual* first part that analyzes how gift practices constitute communities in any traditional culture and why it still remains a bonding factor in present business practices, and a second part that emphasizes some concrete *practices* in which immoral aberrations and moral pretensions of the logic of the gift are highlighted.

The first chapter of Part I, *Anthropology of the Gift*, describes the basic logic of the gift, attempting to formulate presuppositions about the social nature of man and to decipher how and why gifts ensue in a socio-political context. The characteristics of the gift are deciphered from a socio-philosophical perspective. In particular, the reciprocity principle which is related to social obligations that among others presumably hold together communities is analyzed.

The second chapter, *Ethics of a Gift*, analyzes the normative aspects of what a gift could or should be, especially whether or not a gift should be unilateral or reciprocal. The ethics of the gift will focus on the solidarity aspect of the gift, without ignoring other less benevolent features of gift-giving practices. The ethics of a gift cannot completely escape the *ambiguity* of the gift concept itself. Moreover, it could be argued that gifts constituting a ‘bond’ are hardly completely ‘free’.

However, in some rare occasions, gifts reveal some genuine generosity. The third chapter will rephrase the question of whether a benevolent gratuitous gift is *possible per se*, and whether such a generous gift can ever escape the economic rationality of the principle of reciprocity. A philosophical radical reading of the gift – be it a ceremonial, personal or moral

gift – indicates that despite its ambiguity, the gift may imply an ‘openness’, beyond the principle of pure reciprocity, leaving traces of pure generosity behind.

In the first chapter of Part II, it will be argued that a gift can be inverted into a *bribe*. If a gift is perceived as being so fundamental within communities, how then does a gift become transmuted into a disguised form of a gift? Despite obvious conceptual similarities between an alleged gift and a reciprocal gift, both can be clearly distinguished. Despite the presumably varying meaning of gifts in different cultures under different circumstances, a conceptual comparative ethical analysis (of the logic) of the gift will clarify why such deplorable social interactions as bribery could emerge under the banner of benevolent gifts.

Chapter two of Part II briefly describes the *myth of philanthropy* in which the pros and cons of corporate social responsibility in the form of corporate donations are analyzed. Despite the presumably well-intended corporate gifts, such ostentatious behavior could easily turn into a destructive and cynical public relations exercise. Moreover such corporate activities could become counterproductive and even undermine the objectives of a good reputation and corporate citizenship that is at the basis of the action.

The third chapter of Part II pretends nothing more than to think in practical terms about the logic of the gift, more specifically its possible practical aberration or pretensions, and an *epistemological understanding* of gift practices in business. To admit the likelihood that in the future there will be modifications of scientific, social and moral practices does not lead to epistemological skepticism but only to a realization of human fallibility and the finitude of human rationality.

Finally, the *Epilogue* will emphasize that *the ambiguity of a gift* reveals some limits of the principle of reciprocity. A certain attitude of giving away without expecting an (immediate) return is at the roots of equivalence and reciprocity. Without giving our time and giving ourselves, reciprocity would not occur. In order to obtain such cooperative interaction, some unilateral gift is presupposed. In other words, an initial expression of generosity which goes beyond the pure principle of reciprocity constitutes cooperation. Such a unilateral asymmetrical gift may well cement the principle of reciprocity.

This expression of abundance causes the social or personal interaction to take place. The logic of the gift, despite its destructive aberrations, can be interpreted as an expression of the paradigm of recognition, acknowledging the principle of reciprocity that is rooted in a form of abundant excess. As the principle of reciprocity incites us to return a favor in our social interaction, a unilateral gift not only generates reciprocity but also generously for-gives beyond the principle of reciprocal equity, indicating some possible limits of the principle reciprocity.