

## Gift-giving: The Feminine Principle of Communication by Genevieve Vaughan

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When the question arises of determining a practice, both on the individual and the group level, which is a radical alternative to existing to harmful practice, it is extremely useful to have a theory by which it may be examined, inspired, and guided. It would be surprising if the non-participating victims and silent partners of war, abuse and oppression did not have a world view which was in reality quite different from that of the purveyors of violence. When I was just becoming a feminist the dilemma appeared to me in these terms: Why if women are not inferior to men have we not succeeded in being like them? The answer to that seems to be that we have a radically different 'way'-different needs, interests, perceptions, rewards, patterns of behavior. Since we make up 52% of humanity, this different 'way' is at least as widespread as men's ways. We can identify this by saying that it exists concretely as the nurturing practice of women as opposed to the competitive hierarchical practice of men. (1)

It has been part of the men's ways to define women and to cloud our perception of ourselves, making us think that theirs was the only reality and that we were not really doing anything. But the fact that we participate in a distinctive mode is being revealed to us as feminism spreads and intensifies. Our alternative way, hidden in our housework, has an enormous potential as a model. Recognizing, re-evaluating, and following it can solve the atrocious problems, which have been created by the sometimes unbridled negative behavior patterns that the male way has created. It is therefore being revealed as already existing, not invented and imposed from above by a restricted elite. The elite is, of course, a typical form or result of competitive hierarchical behavior. Recognizing and empowering the women's nurturing way creates immediate spontaneous collective bonding. It demystifies and often (at last) trivializes the macho images which have enslaved our imaginations, our loving hearts and often our battered bodies and those of our children.

Feminist theory at the present stage really consists of reclaiming the power, not only of definition, but the more humble yet very important one of description of reality. We are naming and describing what has always been there but unseen. And we are doing this collectively and for the good of all. It is important to do this in calm and supportive atmosphere, so that while we maintain our focus on social change, we have the unagitated clarity of vision which allows us to see the roots of the problems and the possible solutions. This is not an appeal to objectivity, which is so often really reactionary, but only to enough disengagement to allow clear-sightedness. Academic language and questions can sometimes provide a vehicle for this, and that is the reason for the academic tone of this paper.

I want to propose one principle for change, which I call that of re-evolution instead of revolution. This involves taking the female model as defining humanity, instead of the male, along the same lines of, for example, Jean Baker Miller in "Towards a New Psychol-

ogy of Women” and Carol Gilligan in “In a Different Voice.”

One basic part of the logic underlying the choice of the female model over the male, involves two identifications that will be unfamiliar. The first is that of considering women’s free labor as a gift economy hidden beneath the male exchange economy. I was pleased when I arrived in the United States in 1983 to find a book by Lewis Hyde, “The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property” — which, in the section dedicated to the theory of the gift, develops this theme to some extent. I had been thinking along these lines myself for several years and found it useful to see explicitly put also by someone else. I mention this not to personally lay first claim to an idea—which I think is a typically male attitude—but because I want you to know that it is a thesis that a woman independently came upon—that it is at least to a large extent, a woman’s idea.

The second identification that will be unfamiliar takes the gift, as opposed to exchange, as the basic principle in communication and language. It was in fact in looking at language in terms of exchange and then trying to see the women’s part of language that I began to look at the women’s economy as one of gift-giving. The identification of the logic of what we do with goods and the logic of what we do with words, that is, of the economic and linguistic sides of things, will also be unfamiliar to some and perhaps indigestible. But it is part of a unified approach, a re-vision of what usually is divided and conquered by male definition and specialization.

To give you the idea, let’s say then that with these identifications—women’s economy is a gift economy and language is based on gift-giving—we find the women’s economy (if you want to give it an even bigger name—an aspect of the female principle) in language. If, as is commonly thought, language (along with material production) is what allowed our evolutionary leap, couldn’t we use this logical principle that is in language of gift-giving—the female principle—as a guide to re-evolve and leap again, taking the female economy as model, not the male?

Whereas revolution is based on male violence, struggle, and dominance, re-evolution could be based on, or is, reproduction of human beings according to a model that is different from the one we now follow but which already exists. This positive evaluation of the model also already takes place in ontogenesis (2) by the mother’s proposing and maintaining herself or another as a model to be imitated by the child. That is, as a model for the child of what the human being is. The idea here is to empower the female model in the family and then to extend it outside the family and generalize it. In order to describe a bit more fully what this model entails, I have tried to look at the gift economy, (call it altruism also if you like) as a logic which creates relations and function through them. Before I begin discussing it, I just want to mention that self-sacrifice is not logically implied by the principle of altruism but is imposed by the economic, social, psychological, and psychic situation created by the fact that giving just to satisfy other’s needs is not a generally respected form of behavior. Also, satisfying needs in such basic human behavior that it seems obvious and uninformative. This does not of course make it unimportant.

Marcel Mauss and Claude Levi-Strauss are the main proponents of the gift economy as seen in anthropological studies. Their theses insist on the obligation of reciprocity as the

moving principle of gift giving. It is always a question of *do ut des*. However, the examples given, such as the Kula gift exchange or the custom of Potlach, always take place among men. Women, on the other hand, do a great part of their labor for others without reciprocity. In fact, the well-being of the other person is often the motive and end of their activity. Some of this altruism is also object-oriented, in that much of women's work of maintenance, cleaning, and washing is devoted to the well-being of things. Women are also able to interpret the unexpressed needs of others, satisfying them before they ask. To do this we must pay attention, orient ourselves toward others. Lewis Hyde contests (as myself did some years ago) the principle of reciprocity as the basis for the nature and movement of gifts. Although gratitude is for him a spiritual feeling and a social binder, it is not the return gift that is the motive for the gift of the original giver. In fact, the gift may be given to a third or fourth person, or more. Gratitude lies in using the gift and in imitating the giver, thus becoming in one's own terms a giver. If people do this rather than turning gifts into private property, which does not circulate except through an exchange of equivalents, the original givers will also receive free gifts from others. In a society where the gift economy was the main mode, the original givers would not remain empty-handed forever but would receive gifts freely given by the other, or by someone else again. In our exchange economy gifts as gifts are stopped dead in their tracks, and it may happen that the giver never receives anything freely given to her by anyone.

Hyde speaks of how in the gift economy, a gift increases as it passes from person to person—he recounts folk tales in which, as he says, “fertility and growth are common fruits of gift exchange and either the bearers of the gift or the gift itself grows as a result of circulation.” The gift as it circulates acquires a spirit, for the Maori, for instance, a *hau*, which is a yield on the gift. It is an increase of the original object, if not physically, then in terms of social meaning or significance. Hyde explains the increase of the gift in three ways: “as a natural fact (when gifts are actually alive); as a natural spiritual fact (when gifts are the agents of a spirit that survives its successive embodiments): and a social fact (when circulation of gifts creates community out of individual expressions of goodwill)”, (p. 37). Gifts are simply not gifts if they are not used, either by being consumed or by being given away again. Let me quote a little more:

“Legal contract bears a vestige of the gift ‘contract’, but gift exchange must be placed in a separate sphere because where contract sanctioned by law may formalize the union of gift exchange, it does so by disengaging it from the other components of a ‘total social phenomenon’. It sheds the emotional and spiritual content. The process of law requires a particular kind of society—it requires, to begin with, adversaries and reckoning, both of which are excluded by gift exchange. Because the spirit of the gift shuns exactness and because gifts do not necessarily move reciprocally (and therefore, do not produce the adversary roles of creditor and debtor), courts of law would be rightly perplexed as to how to adjudicate a case of ingratitude.”

In all this there is the idea that gift giving creates community, whereas reciprocal exchange—*do ut des* (3) — creates individuals in an adversary position. It also creates boundaries between the internal gift-giving to a community or family and the reciprocal exchange outside it.

Claude Levi-Strauss studied the exchange of women in marriage as gifts between clans or other kinship groups. Here, too, I would question reciprocity at least as the immediate end, since in fact, the gift of the woman is not always reciprocated by the same group that receives her. While he does recognize our communicative capacity, saying that women are gifts that speak. Levi-Strauss is one more participant in our patriarchal cultural blind spot regarding women's labor. The most important thing is that if women are gifts, we are gifts who give, who, by our labor and our lives cause an increase for others.

There are then three economic categories under examination here. The first is that of economic exchange based on the equivalence of the things exchanged and this requires measurement, calculation, and balanced scales. Each exchanger recognizes the other and himself as a subject who dominates her/his own property, and since each gives only to receive something in return, each by giving to the other satisfies only her/his own need to receive something. Her/his own independent existence as a subject is the motive and end result of the process. This process is identified by Hyde as *logos*.

The second is gift-exchange as viewed by Mauss or Levi-Strauss, in which the sense of obligation to reciprocate is important. Here the gift is given in order to establish ties through reciprocity. Both the quality of the gift and the giver are recognized as important in this process. It may take place between individuals or groups and is made to establish overt ties. In the anthropological material it also takes place mostly among men. Gifts that circulate among many people, and acquire a 'hau', or spirit, are variations of this process of distribution of goods. Hyde says that there are degrees of reciprocity in gift-giving, but in a sense the gift becomes free and a greater producer of links when the obligation of the receiver is simply to give it away, but not necessarily back to the person who gave it.

The gift perishes for the person who gives it away. In gift exchange, the transaction itself consumes the object. Now it is true that something often comes back when a gift is given, but if this were made an explicit condition of the exchange it wouldn't be a gift...a market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis, you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum and the weight passes from body to body.

This process is identified by Hyde as *eros*: life-oriented.

The third economic category (which we are looking at as women's way), can be seen as free satisfaction of needs of one person by another. This can be subsumed under the second category of gift-exchange, but it differs from it in that 1) the gifts are usually life-sustaining and need satisfying not just symbolic, 2) no reciprocity is required and, 3) in that the status of the giver as giver, and of the need satisfaction as gift, may be unrecognized. In fact, if they were recognized they might be part of the creation of an obligation to reciprocate. On the other hand, the process of satisfying another's needs may create in the other the desire to imitate the need-satisfier even when this is not recognized by left-brain type consciousness, and in fact, it may be easier and more effective to transmit models without going through left-brain consciousness. We learn to walk, for example, by following a model not by serial knowledge. Whatever the positive sides of the invisibility of women's gift-giving, however, the lack of recognition fits in with a general picture of women as inferior and is an important element in the devaluation of women's way. It is up to us as feminists to re-evaluate it, describe it as something not only worthwhile but necessary to life itself. In fact, the economic categories of exchange can be seen as only sub processes of as much wider

category of gift-giving or other-oriented need satisfaction. The magic of gift-giving is hidden in this egomaniac society, but it is what still creates human ties in a world of exchange and reciprocal independence and solitude. As we bring gift-giving to light, we should try to respect some of the positive aspects that kept it hidden. One of these is that what appears free or natural, is more easily appropriable or shareable. That is, when it has no strings attached, it creates a common ground (as sometimes nature does—but always with women's help) for communitary groups, groups whose needs are satisfied in similar ways and with regards to similar things. I really think people need not to be obligated at every step of the way, that external obligation is often an obstacle to growth. The relations of those in a group to each other is also often influenced by a similar relation to their common ground, and to the objects which satisfy their needs. If they had always to recognize the giver of the things that satisfy their needs, their sense of dependence might be greater, and their relations would be more to the giver than to each other, their common ground, or themselves. It is, therefore, important that they become able to recognize the objects that satisfy their needs creating a relation of common knowledge that allows a better possibility of appropriating and using them collectively and individually. This can be done better if they appear to be free. That is, if, in adding up obligations, women's work doesn't count. The one who counts is the receiver of the gifts. The woman causes the other to count more by not counting her own work as such. This is also because the scope of this work is generally the well-being of the other person. In doing this she has really to study and be interested in the other's needs, and give importance or value to the other person. It is partly this that creates the self-value, capacity to relate, and the self-respect of the other.

I think that it is this process of need satisfaction or free gift-giving that is the fundamental process to which the other economic categories can be reduced. They can be seen as its complications and elaborations. But it is also the basic psychological process involved in creating relations and identities. Unfortunately, the lack of recognition of women as gift-givers also leaves us open to misappropriation of our gifts by others. They may take what we do not want to give or themselves claim recognition for the gifts we have given them. In a situation where gift-giving is seen socially as irrelevant or aberrant we may find ourselves giving to the point of exhaustion and never being given to. In fact, the exploitation of the giver may be seen as the basic paradigm of exploitation. This paper is simply a first attempt to bring gift-giving to women's consciousness in some of its positive and negative aspects and in its logic so that we can empower it and use it for the common good.

What is the connection of all this with language?

In the first place, I would like to say something that goes back to the connection between economics and language. This is that basically, communication is a non-sign process. This doesn't mean I believe it works on ESP, but rather that it is basically material communication, the giving and receiving of things that satisfy needs, that creates relations between us and to things. It creates bodies and minds that are related to each other as similar with respect to many different types of things. (I consume "X" and you consume "X"—while "X" does not consume us—we are similar with regard to "X", which is different from us but similar to other "X's", which may be consumed in other moments by us or by others like us).

Language as gift-giving (also unrecognized as such) is an elaboration of the basic principle of need satisfaction of one person by another, just as the economic categories above were. This is because language, like giving and receiving, creates the subjectivity of the interactors not only with respect to what they do, but to why they do it and who they do it with. Language, like exchange (that is a complication or doubling of giving), can function to sustain and emphasize the subjectivity of the speaker, satisfying only his/her needs by means of the satisfaction of the needs of the other, giving him/her dominance. But it would not work at all without giving in order to satisfy needs, and creating relations by this more simple procedure.

Gift-giving creates relations of similarity and difference providing evidence of them through capacity for use of what is given. When the same thing is given to the giver, this proves that she is able to use what she produces, and is therefore like the previous receiver. Although giving things and satisfying needs creates relations, there are many things with regard to which one would like to create relations but which cannot be transferred from hand to hand. This difficulty is overcome by substituting other things that can be given. And here we come to language because these substitute gifts are words.

Words have the advantage over things in that, being made of sound, their consumption or use does not destroy them and they can be given away again and again. The needs they satisfy are communicative needs. The relations they establish are useful to the formation of the community and of the individual as well as of the world or 'reality' as something which is shared and with regard to which relations are shared.

Another way to avoid the difficulty of giving things directly is to give them only perceptively, to sight. This is enough to establish a relation between people as viewers of the same thing. However, I do not think it would work if the logical movement of giving and receiving things were not already established. This giving to perception can be identified as ostension—pointing things out. In both cases you give what is not already given at the moment—what there is not already a relation to—and in both cases the 'gifts' seem free.

Words are given to us by others in general. They are social products which arise in the language when the things they stand for begin to be important enough for a need to arise for a means of communication at a certain level of specificity (and generality). Things that are important enough to be communicated about—substituted by word—are products of collective work or elaboration, unrecognized as such. The things themselves seem to be important apart from society, but even the importance is a social product. The dialectic of the attribution of importance (or value) here is similar to that of the woman's attribution of value to others while denying that of her own work. We do not recognize the value or importance of the things we communicate about as a social product, but it is. Words function to satisfy the need for a means to a relation to something, a need that the speaker sees the hearer as having insofar as she is not yet in this relation at the moment. The speaker may need for her own relation to something to be a common relation between herself and the other, but the need for a common relation is also a need for the other's need. New needs develop on the premise of what is already given, and new things to give sometimes become useful only after other things have been given. The speaker gives the listener words which prepare her to receive (or understand) other words which she has given or will give.

Through individual combinations of word gift substitutes, we create new nonverbal things that we give or show, such as ideas, plans, points of view. The message is a present. Part of the present is the way it is organized. It is conveyed by an individual gift—a phrase or discourse using the social gifts of words.

I hope this very brief glimpse of communication and language as gift-giving suffices to let us come back to my statement in the beginning. By liberating the gift-giving side of our economy, which is the province of women, making it into a model for the definition of the species—material communication can be established between those who have the means and those who are now exploited and excluded by exchange and its dominant subjects. This will allow both others and ourselves to re-evolve as human beings.

By recognizing the gift-giving side of our economy and of language and seeing their similarities we find their common logic. It is a logic simpler than that of exchange and forms relations between human beings. Such relations also create the identity of the persons involved in the socialization process. Exchange instead isolates the individual and promotes ego dominance. In an advanced capitalist society where exchange permeates every activity, and even words—or at least phrases—are bought and sold in advertising, we can see how things that were originally gifts have been absorbed into exchange. Women's gift-giving is not valued or it is valued in an ambiguous way—and the only sure measure of human importance is how much people are worth competing on the open labor market. Even the tendency to pay women less than men for comparable labor can be seen as an attempt to make us give some of our labor as a free gift. This perhaps can be taken as evidence of how important the gift economy is both materially and psychologically. Everyone needs someone to attribute (give) value or importance to them and this is done when we labor for them free.

What is suggested here is that we stop following the model of exchange, and in its place, put gift-giving—of which exchange is really only a corruption albeit a pervasive one. The principle of the gift, of other-oriented need-satisfaction is viable and life giving. It is the principle by which the five billion people on earth can form a peaceful community living in abundance.

Footnotes:

(1) I do not have a biological bias according to which behavior is directly determined by biology but think that these practices are social roles, or more precisely, roles assigned by cultures according to their interpretations of the meaning—also a social factor—of our biologies. It is important to avoid the biological bias since it breeds fatalism, 'Men are that way by their nature, they'll never change.' The explanation as social interpretation instead seems to be borne out by the fact that some men do follow a more nurturing way (choosing the women's mode) while some women follow a competitive ego-oriented way more adapted to the world men make for themselves. In other words, since each gender can take on the behaviors of the other it would seem evident that neither is biologically pre-destined by nature to behave in a particular way.

(2) Ontogenesis is the development of each individual from conception to maturity as

contrasted to phylogenesis, the development of a species.

(3) Do ut des is a Latin expression meaning "I give so that you will give."

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