

Chapter Title: Life Is a Gift

Book Title: Beta Exercise

Book Subtitle: The Theory and Practice of Osamu Kanemura

Book Editor(s): Marco Mazzi, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

Published by: Punctum Books. (2019)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.2353790.3>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.



JSTOR

Punctum Books is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Beta Exercise*

Life Is a Gift

The Isetan department store in Tokyo used an advertising slogan, “Life is a Gift,” for their 2015 Christmas promotion. Does this rather assertive phrase mean human life is a wonderful gift unexpectedly given by Almighty God? If gifts are connected with the grace of God, why did Isetan, an avatar of commodity society, use this word, whose real meaning runs against commercialism, in this advertisement?

If life is really a gift from Almighty God, it must be irreconcilable with a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production that produces a huge mass of commodities. A commodity requires exchange, while a gift is not supposed to be exchanged. The latter should be unilaterally given, while the former offers a network of social relationships. It reflects the entire chain of exchange that permeates society like a web. How is it possible to establish common traits between these two things?

A commodity is produced by anonymous “abstract labor.” It is an accumulation of symbolic labor disconnected from concrete labor, and this concrete side of labor is always diminishing. A gift has the material trace of God inscribed, while a commodity requires no such thing. A number of commodities need to have equivalent value for exchange, which is only made possible by alienating labor from actual production.

Capitalist society detaches people from their land and means of production, and makes them nomadic and mobile. Those who have lost their land and means of production have to ex-

change themselves as laborers in order to survive. Once it becomes nomadic, human labor is allowed to enter the market as an exchangeable commodity. People cannot commodify their labor, nor do they need to do so, until they detach themselves from their grounded lifeworld. Only when people are alienated from their land and means of production, are they able to become a commodity. It's a process of abstraction and symbolization, and only those who have experienced it are allowed access to the market. Homogenized, abstracted humans lacking concreteness — people changing their symbolic status to transform themselves into exchangeable labor.

In capitalist society, human life bearing a special mark of divinity — in other words, the gift — is also traded as a commodity. People transform their lives, the precious gift from God, into an exchangeable unit of abstract labor in order to maintain their lives. Does Isetan's slogan, "Life is a Gift," encourage us to transform the gift into a commodity, the precious divine gift into a flat abstract concept? The commodity requires abstraction; otherwise it cannot flow freely within the market. No similarity can be found between commodity and gift; the former basically transforms concrete human labor into an abstract concept, and the latter is essentially non-symbolic, a divine favor.

For humans who cannot live without exchanging goods, the relationship involving exchange is essential for maintaining their lives. Therefore, everything has to be transformed into an exchangeable commodity. The act of exchange is so essential to human life that this process of commodification is absolutely necessary.

A gift is given voluntarily. Unlike a commodity, a gift denies the giver's ulterior motive of self-preservation. The act of gift giving is altruistic without expecting any return, which is completely different from the act of exchange. No market exists for gifts. The gift is given with no particular reason, which resembles the relationship between humans and the sun. If our life is given by grace of God, humans are basically passive, always waiting to be given to, just like we await the sunshine. The gift forms an asymmetrical relationship between giver and recipi-

ent, making the latter a passive entity. The illusion that the market hosts exchange or transaction between equal partners does not exist here from the very beginning. The recipients have no other option but to be passive.

Or does the slogan “Life is a Gift” suggest that exchanging heartfelt gifts is the most important thing in human life? A video clip displayed on a huge monitor in an Isetan store window showed people from different areas singing Letkajenkka and dancing an “extremely happy Jenkka dance.” The joy of connection and its significance was the theme of this clip, and it emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships based on gratitude, goodwill and love. This attitude is contrary to the altruistic nature of gifts; it merely reflects gift-givers’ desire to be approved of by others.

The need for approval demands recognition and respect from other people; it expects affirmation from the group one belongs to. To be grateful to each other is a form of mutual recognition, which is different from the altruistic relationship found between gift-givers and recipients. Feelings that motivate gift giving, i.e., gratitude, goodwill, and love, desire approval from others and lapse into becoming instead an exchange of commodities.

The sun is not likely to shine above us out of its desire for approval, nor does it do so out of gratitude, goodwill, or love. I suspect what prompts the sun is sheer altruism without any concern about the consequences. The sun is basically indifferent toward people or things it reflects light upon. It just keeps shining and does not care at all about the consequences it may bring; it does not take heed of droughts it has caused, either. The fierce, indifferent altruism of the sun even ignores the balance of the environment. Nuclear power plants, invented to artificially create a sun, commodify the altruistic energy of the sun. The sun becomes something exchangeable. When the sun is commodified, its excessive, intense energy cannot be contained. Nuclear power plants were made on the assumption that the sun’s destructive energy is controllable. It might have been an attempt to challenge the overwhelming power of the altruistic sun — in

other words, the gift — and to overturn the passive, powerless condition of human beings.

Daily exchange with others is indispensable for us. Relationships with others determine our identity; likewise, interaction with others during exchange plays an essential role in our lives. Did Isetan's slogan understand the significance of exchange for us and compare it to unexpected gifts given by others? Exchange that functions as mutual help encourages us to live in reciprocal gift-giving relationships on a daily basis. But does this conceal a violent desire for approval and expectation of gratitude and love to be expressed all the time? Altruistic approval from others, approval given to others without expecting anything, exists nowhere.

Exchange is indispensable for maintaining human life. Unlike animals, human beings can only live within a network of exchange; they have to commodify everything to maintain their life. Exchange does not mean to hoard acquired wealth; that would eventually exhaust the wealth of both sides as in the potlatch of Native Americans. The concentration of wealth is a pathology of modern society; a surplus accumulates in the hands of a few, specific capitalists, and will never be used up or given to others as gifts. The act of exchange challenges this individual concentration of wealth by re-distributing the surplus, just as in case of the potlatch.

In the potlatch, the chiefs of indigenous communities compete with each other according to the amount of gifts they exchange. "When a chief cannot return the equivalent or greater goods than the gift he has received, or when he cannot give away an equivalent or greater gift to fellow members of the community, or when he cannot destroy possessions that have equivalent or higher value, he loses face in the potlatch: 'he becomes subordinate to his competitor, his power diminishes and has to tolerate being in an inferior position.' Therefore, the chiefs strive to compete with each other in gift giving. This competition be-

came so fervent that the Canadian government banned it from 1884 to 1951.”*

The cruelty of the potlatch exchange system shares something in common with the notion of gifts conceived by Isetan: people have to keep giving to others equivalent or better gifts as an expression of gratitude and love. The promotion video “Life is a Gift,” which shows an image of presents wrapped up with ribbons in an endless line, overflowing into the universe, seems to demand that we keep buying things for gift giving. The slogan may imply the potlatch-like cruelty inherent in gift exchange? Or its catchy phrase probably conceals a violent desire for mutual approval, accompanying gift exchange practices in capitalist society?

Isetan’s slogan fails to conceal the cruelty and violence hidden in the act of exchange. The highest level of gratitude and love is self-renunciation. As the expression “Love your neighbour as yourself” says, the renunciation of self is the ultimate expression of gratitude and love. However, where can we find self-renunciation in Isetan’s notion of gifts? Gift giving is a demand for the subordination of others; it cannot fully hide the gift-givers’ cruel, violent desire to control and dominate others even under the guise of Christmas gift exchange—a token of gratitude and love. We can say people are taking part in a milder form of the potlatch, which will never result in killing, nor does it destroy the hierarchy that exists in family or love relationships in bourgeois society.

A relationship involving exchange, whose initial purpose is to express gratitude and love, often conceals a struggle for supremacy. The practice of gift giving in bourgeois society hides the intention to dominate others by offering more gifts. When the recipients disapprove of this intention, “a milder form of the potlatch that does not destroy the hierarchy” is dispensed with and a violent desire to exterminate others emerges. The purpose of war is to impose one’s principle upon the other, bring them

* Shigeru Hashimoto, *Kotowaza to kakugen no shakaigaku* [Sociology of Proverbs and Maxims], <http://www5b.biglobe.ne.jp/~geru/page018.html>.

to surrender and make a profit out of it, but once it becomes apparent that the enemy will not surrender, the initial purpose is easily forgotten and the agenda now becomes the extermination of the enemy. When the gift givers' strategy to initiate a bigger return fails, profit is no longer the issue and exterminating the other becomes the new goal. Isetan's slogan "Life is a Gift" conceals this kind of unconscious, violent desire.