

The Gift

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The Gift

We are forgetting how to give presents. Violation of the exchange principle has something nonsensical and implausible about it. . . . [Today] even the private giving of presents has degenerated to a social function exercised with rational bad grace, careful adherence to the prescribed budget, skeptical appraisal of the other and the least possible effort. Real giving had its joy in imagining the joy of the receiver. It means choosing, expending time, going out of one's way, thinking of the other as a subject: the opposite of distraction. Just this hardly anyone is now able to do. At best they give what they would have liked themselves, only a few degrees worse. The decay of giving is mirrored in the distressing invention of gift-articles, based on the assumption that one does not know what to give because one really does not want to.

*Theodor Adorno,
Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life (1944)*

1. A paradox of gift giving, often alluded to, is that when conducted as obligation, it is profoundly depressive. There is something wrong here. After all, the act of giving, if we disengage it from Christmas and its horrors, should be a positive thing. The gift ought to be that which, when proffered by the giver, induces a double joy — that of the receiver in the object, and that of the giver at the receiver's joy. Neither of these joys is inconsiderable. It is worth analyzing them because they tell us something about how things work for us and, therefore, something about the character of design activity.

Ideally the receiver of the gift obtains a double joy. First, and most obviously, there is a joy in the thing itself, the object received. The proper gift gives happiness because it matches perfectly one moment of the receiver's needs and desires. Sometimes it even helps receivers discover and satisfy desires they did not know they had. Second, the gift gives joy because the successful gift affirms a positive relationship between giver and receiver. It is concrete or evident proof that the giver knows, and has understood, recognized, affirmed, and sought to concretely meet the other's most intimate needs and

desires. Moreover, the receiver finds additional joy in being the subject of the imaginative work undertaken by the giver in securing and giving this gift. The successful gift proves to us that our relationship to the giver is more than merely formal or nominal.

For the giver, the joy is perhaps more subtle, but nonetheless significant. It is a joy, first and foremost, in pleasing others, in getting to know their tastes, interests, and character, in recognizing and accepting their needs and desires (even if contrary to our own). But it is also a pleasure in successfully finding a material thing that successfully concretizes these desires — that gives receivers “exactly what they wanted.”

Note that the gift is not just the thing itself. If the nature of the object or product that we proffer is essential, it is, nonetheless, not all we give. What the giver gives besides the gift-object is *recognition* — which both Lacan and Hegel recognized as the fundamental human desire, which we crave above all else.

2. Needless to say, this complex potential joy of the gift is *not* what the word calls to mind when we think of Christmas or of bridal showers, birthdays, and all the other occasions when someone, somewhere is formally expecting to receive a “gift” from us and we are obligated to provide one. The transformation of an act that should be based on love and free will into one based on social and economic obligation ensures that resentment dominates the relation.

In this context, what should be the easiest thing — to give joy to others we know — becomes almost impossible. Separated from close empathic relation to the other (especially perhaps from members of our own family), we really have no idea what the other wants.

In any case, resentment is economically induced. While the gift relation obligates us to spend money (and to know that the price of things is always known to the receiver), the double meanness of our economy — which fetishizes scarcity and constantly tells us that we lack everything, yet obligates us to buy and to feel belittled if we cannot spend to excess — makes us resent “squandering” precious financial resources. Is it surprising then, as Adorno intimates, that instead of joy, bad conscience (and a sense of disappointment in ourselves) dominates the act of giving?

3. The bad grace that the *obligated* gift relationship so often induces finds its counterpart in the objects which are invented to service its requirements.

The invention of the gift-article — the *bête noire* of industrial designers — is a result both of the logical economic exploitation of the enforced gift relation (why look a gift horse in the mouth?) and of creating an “answer” (for the would-be gift buyer) to the “problem” of the true gift. The gift-article as substitute for a genuine gift becomes an object made to carry a superficial connotation of a “personal” relationship, and is almost wholly unrelated to

either its buyers or receivers. As Adorno reasons, the gift-article exists indeed only to fill in the absence caused by the fact that “one does not know what to give because one really does not want to.”

Not only does the gift-article, almost by definition, exclude those moments of joy referred to earlier, but the thing itself, the gift, takes on a peculiar condition when it is given under these circumstances. When it is not prosaic and relentlessly practical (e.g., the list of items the middle-class bride and groom make available at Bloomingdales in order that one can help them furnish a home with fondue sets and a fake onyx bathroom set) the gift-article is an excessive and useless item — indeed, it is like a simulacrum, a thing which is almost not a thing (as with the “gift book,” for example, which is a book that is very nearly not a book).

But this is consistent with how the gift-article is intended to work. Just as the gift book is not intended to be read but merely given, transactionally, as a sign of expenditure, so the first principle of the gift-article as a whole is to signify for both receiver and giver a certain “wasteful” expenditure (by the giver, for the receiver). But this expenditure is nominal, not substantive: the gift-article is simply the sign of “money spent.”

In some ways we may think this scarcely matters. But while the small gift-article is often used precisely to signify or mark a relationship to the other (the gift as a token of friendship, a sign of caring), a generalized culture of gift-articles marks the existence of a formal but not a substantial relationship to the other. Because most of our relationships are now of this order, the gift-article is paradoxically their perfect representation. (Proof of this last point is that we would never buy those we love a “gift-article”: only real and substantive things will do for those with whom we have a real and substantive relationship.)

That the gift-article is only a sign of a thing and that it marks only a formal and not a substantive relationship is consistent too with how “gifts” work in public exchanges. The White House and Buckingham Palace are both stuffed with the bad taste of a thousand such empty “relationships.” All of this explains, also, the natural obloquy we feel for the “gift” object (and the contempt we feel for the culture of Hallmark and other purveyors of the gift culture — including those extraordinary minions whose exalted job it is to be corporate gift buyers)!

It also explains why we feel that the gift culture lies at the opposite end of designing and making from professional industrial design. The gift-article seems to possess few, if any, of the restorative, recuperative, or transformative powers that real things can have for us.

4. Any idea that reflection on gifts and giving is marginal to the professional concerns of object makers is quite wrong. Neither the seeming peculiarity of the gift-article — neither its triviality, nor

the fact that it seems to include, as a category, almost wholly non-useful things — as if it were a quantum of the useless which marked the superfluity of the gift process itself; nor again the (nominal) work that gifts perform and their almost “decorative” or representational condition, nor even the “femininity” of gift giving rules out the gift-article as a mirror to the conditions of designing things today.

On the contrary. In the condition of the gift-article and the obloquy into which the very idea of “the gift” has fallen lie some important truths about our relations to things and objects.

In the first place, the gift-article is a perfect exemplum of the diminished affect and valence of things and products in general characteristic of many industrial products. The state to which the gift-article is reduced mimics the generalized loss of a real relation to the subject which we find over and over again in the usual run of contemporary (sign-)products.

Even the contemporary use of narrative or semantic models of product meaning echoes in a way what is already known well in gift shops, namely, that gift-articles sell themselves largely on the basis of visible associations. Hence, the product too can be seen as a substitute, an item whose rationale for existence many times has no greater logic than that of the gift commodity.

It is instructive in this respect to re-read Adorno’s critical comments on giving and the gift. They could well stand in part as a descriptive critique of the basis of some of the worst forms of product development: a process also summed up in his sentence that in giving, the resentful givers “at best [give] what they would have liked themselves, only a few degrees worse.” In other words, looked at carefully, the gift-article is not the other to the professional product design but its twin: the image of what, in actuality, the designed object often is more nearly like.

5. However, if the gift-article is a kind of mirror to the alienating product, the more positive side of this parallel is that the quantum of joy lying in the gift relation is there to be potentially opened in *any* everyday relation between a product and a user. This argument would imply that the act of giving — in the wide positive and reciprocal sense I sketched above — is more integral than we might think both to the work of design and to making in general, and to the art of being human.

Adorno points out that the gift relationship, in its positive aspects, is inescapable. Even those “who no longer give are still in need of giving. In them wither the irreplaceable faculties which cannot flourish in the isolated cell of pure inwardness, but only in live contact with the warmth of things. A chill descends on all they do, the kind word that remains unspoken, the consideration unexercised. This chill finally recoils on those from whom it emanates. Every undistorted relationship, perhaps indeed the conciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift. He who through consequential logic

becomes incapable of it, makes himself a thing and freezes.”

To put it another way, where the ability to understand the worth of the outer gift — “the warmth of the object” — is lost, so too is inner life. The gift keeps open the passage between inner and outer life. Without it both moments disintegrate.

We can begin to make sense of these claims by seeing how the notion of the true gift, and model of gift giving, offers a different way of conceptualizing how it is that, at best, objects work for a user from those tacitly accepted. Economic theory, for example, from which design practice draws a number of its axioms without always understanding that it does so, stresses the functioning of goods either in terms of commodity exchange (where the object has almost ceased to be a substantive thing) or in terms of how goods function for the isolated and monadic individual subject in terms of material welfare and comfort on the one hand, consumption, possession, and display on the other.

What is notable here is that these essentially *possessive* models of the object put so dominant a stress on the acquisition and deployment of objects by the individual subject that we find it almost impossible to conceive of a different relationship to things and to the other. Thus, even if goods are also sometimes seen in an inter-individual context, as elements in an information system, for example (say as markers of categories, most obviously of status),¹ the stress is always on their use by the individual subject, never on how the objects work *between* two subjects.

1) On goods as an information system, see Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

Yet, why do we make things *for another's use* at all? Is there not, at the core of our impulse to make things, something closer to the ideal gift relationship? To put it another way, is not the work of the designer, at its best, nearer to the impulse that motivates the gift giver who gives out of love than to the huckster who provides the market with another “substitute” object? And is this not because objects work not only possessively, for the individual subject who owns them, but also *dialogically*, that is, between subjects, working at once to aid subjects materially in how they live but working also as a means of establishing concrete relations with the other?

That this offers a picture of making or of the working of objects which is unfamiliar to us today is not because of inherent limitations in the conditions of making and designing but of the real distortions placed into the relationships between subjects and objects. To free ourselves from these — insofar as this is possible within a commodity-driven economy and a performance-driven technology — is to need to rethink the possible basis of the interactions of subjects and things.

6. Of course, we make things in order to meet material needs (and, in our society, in order to produce goods to exchange at a profit). But we can also see the design and making of things as having the purpose of transforming the external world from one which claims

indifference to human fate to one which acknowledges human sentience and the conditions of how we are, as humans, in the world. In other words, it is objects that give us a human world.

This idea rapidly leads to two more. First, we make things not only in order to make things as such (things in themselves), but to make a world that is a particular kind of world in which we can be particular kinds of human beings (for how we can be as human beings is dependent, in large part, on the kinds of human worlds we can make). Second, we make things not simply for *themselves* but for *ourselves*, and for the use of another. If this point is “obvious” its implications are not.

To make *for us* means that making is undertaken to create a world that acknowledges, knows, and recognizes us, and in that knowing seeks also to alleviate some of the severe limitations (physical, physiological, psychological) that we have as human beings. (We invent computers to make up for deficiencies in our abilities to mentally process information. We invent more mundane — but not less significant — things to defray our more physiological limitations: clothes to keep us warm, shelters to protect us, products to aid our lives).

But this means that to make and to design something is to create something whose end is not in itself but is rather “in” the subject *for whom* the object is made (whether that subject is individualized, or is ourselves, collectively, as a whole). On this argument, then, the object is never autonomous, never just “for itself.” It is, in fact — as Elaine Scarry puts it in the important essay which forms the last chapter of her book, *The Body in Pain* — always “only a fulcrum or lever across which the force of creation moves back onto the human site and remakes its makers.”²

2) Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 307. Scarry’s book is essential reading for anyone interested in these issues.

7. This changes, or should change, how we think about the object. Relativized in importance by the fact that it has its ends outside of itself (in the other for whom it is made, and to whom essentially it is *given*), the object is simultaneously raised in significance in terms of the work that it performs *for us*. Objects (help) make us. Making (and designing) are moments of making (and designing) ourselves.

The object is not denied in this process. On the contrary, it is substitutive, but in a wholly, different, and opposite and more beneficial sense than in the case of the gift-article. The object is the substitute for ourselves in the special sense that things work to provide us artificially with what nature “neglected” to bestow on us. But the object is not for all that disconnected from us. Things have their origins, by and large, not only in almost physiological projection from our bodily conditions (as we can read a chair as a mimetic projection and externalization of the spine) but also as a projection, even more fundamentally, of our awareness of the conditions of our sentient existence as a whole.

Thus, a chair, for example, can best be understood as a counterfactual projection about the problem of body weight and the pain of standing — as sentient and physiological “awareness materialized into a freestanding design.” As Scarry points out, only when the chair acts as though it itself knew the pain of standing, or as though it were itself aware of the actualities and complexities of our sense of “embodied aliveness” and the needs and demands that this produces, will it truly accommodate our requirements.

Scarry gives another, rather beautiful, example of this process when she notes that a lightbulb is not merely a physical object. Rather, it is one which

Transforms the human being from a creature who would spend approximately a third of each day groping in the dark, to one who sees simply by wishing to see: its impossibly fragile, milky-white globe curved protectively around an even more fragile, upright-then-folding filament of wire is the materialization of neither retina, nor pupil, nor day-seeing, nor night-seeing; it is the materialization of a counter-factual perception about the dependence of human sight on the rhythm of the earth’s rotation; no wonder it is in its form so beautiful.³

3) Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 292.

The beauty of this passage might obscure its conceptual import. What Scarry is offering us here is a creative redescription of the work of the object (one surely fertile for rethinking product categories and the work of things). The basis of this redescription is a transformation of how things are thought: not as “dead” possessions or signs or markers but as “live gifts” working, at base, “for” us, and working in their “circulation” between and among us to establish a circle of making and self-making.

The lightbulb, so thought, is a remarkable object, *even if we do not recognize this as such*. As the actualization of a series of felt perceptions about our human condition, each analogically rendered into the various moments of its design, the lightbulb (or any similar object) *is* the bringing of these perceptions to real consciousness for us. Only as such can these perceptions truly become evident in the world, and only as such can the sense we have, for example, of the limitations, frailties, needs, and requirements of ourselves as psychically, physically, and physiologically determined beings, find a necessary echo in the reparative and extensive forms of the things we deal with. So put, we can understand objects as a crucial point of exchange, or a vital switch point or mediator between embodied consciousness, that is, the sense of ourselves, and, in actuality, the indifferent world.

To look at things in this way is not just a romantic affectation. It is rather a means of trying to strip away the crudescence that commodity production has interposed between the real work of things

and our understanding and consciousness of what it is they do. What is being proposed here is two-fold. First, objects embody a perception about our condition and work to alleviate the problems that this truth about ourselves causes us. This means that objects fundamentally “wish us well.” But second, this means that the object, no matter what its mundanity, is like a collective gift: it is issued for all of us, and its function or work is giftlike in that its form embodies recognition of our concrete needs and desires. It is, to adapt what I said earlier, concrete proof that the giver — in this case the designer-maker — knows, and has understood, recognized, affirmed, and sought to concretely meet our most intimate and human needs and desires.

Thus, far from standing over us, or against us, objects are, in Scarry’s argument, models of beneficence, a gift that we humans give to each other — indeed, the most ethical of gifts.

8. It is worth exploring this point a little further. One way of thinking about this relation between the gift and the ethics of objects is to see the ideal gift relation, *as it is embodied in the object*, as the opposite of a relation of obligation. Now, to say that the gift relation is at best not a relation of obligation — or at least not directly so — is significant. Anthropological, psychoanalytical, and philosophical explorations of the gift concur that obligation (and its subtle and not-so-subtle manipulation) is the point where questions of power enter into the process of gift giving. Obligation is how the gift is “worked” to create systems of deference and inter-implication (to bind the other into a particular structure of reciprocity).

But the object-as-gift, in the sense we are developing it here, largely negates this condition. Obligation enters the gift structure because the gift is given as a moment of establishing personal or collective relations of power, deference, and obligation. The gift is here in effect a sign or an agent (even allegorically) of these relations. But the object — and especially the mundane object, the everyday product — is not “given” in this way.

To be sure, as a moment, or the agent, the vehicle of capital, the object as commodity, establishes (or helps establish and keep in place, and continually renew) capitalist social relations. The commodity is a condition of existence of capital. But even as a commodity the very impersonality of the relations involved in the market negates the personalized relations of the gift as such. The object as commodity implicates one in capitalism: yet, in its alienation the object, and we its purchasers, users, and consumers, are peculiarly freed, that is, freed of the “personalized” obligations of gift giving.

To put it another way, although the object-as-gift is clearly subject to considerable distortion as a commodity — although all the Marxian strictures on the commodity and alienation apply with ever renewed force to the object in our culture — still the structure of object purchase and use, in its very disengagement from per-

4) Though of course there is no “free lunch,” the obligation vis-à-vis the capitalist commodity is participation in the wage-labor/market system. But it is in the freeing of personal senses of obligation that capitalism speaks to the desire to escape from the limits implied by personalized obligation.

sonalized relations, may paradoxically work to enable the object to work for us as a “free” gift — that is, as a gift without obligation.⁴

The object-as-gift, then, in the form of its giving to the other — not as a gift exactly, but as “something given” without expectation of like-reciprocity — may slip the system of obligation. But this also means, inasmuch as obligation is at the same time the structure of morality, that to slip “obligation” in the first sense is also to escape obligation in the second, moral sense. The object-as-gift, then, “escapes” morality.

Does this mean that the object, then, lies outside of morality altogether? This is certainly one apparent implication of this argument. Translated back into the terms of capitalism and the commodity, it is not difficult to see the ways in which it is easy to maintain this disconnection. It has become, indeed, an axiom of contemporary thinking that this is so.

But it is possible to read this argument in quite another way. To say that the object-as-gift does not participate in a structure of obligation and does not therefore participate in morality, is to say that the object is therefore freed to construe genuinely *ethical* relations. Indeed, it is to say that it is precisely by negating the structure of morality-obligation that it allows the ethical and the imminent to come into view.

That this suggests an opposition between morality and ethics, and the replacement of the one by the other, is interestingly congruent with developments in contemporary ethical thought. This shift, which is fundamentally a shift from thinking ethical relations under the rubric and limits of morality to a more genuinely ethical concern with imminent relations between subjects,⁵ is also based on a movement from a notion of ethical relations thought or understood as an obligation imposed from without⁶ — morality as an abstract law which determines an ideal “ought” for practice (whether as a moral ought or as an autonomous, and yet morally justified, ideal) — to a stress on the understanding of the concrete implications, for the other, of the consequences of an action.

This distinction is of more than semantic or merely philosophical import. It signals a different orientation, a different way of standing to the problem. Deleuze, speaking of Spinoza, puts it in a way that emphasizes both of these points: “Ethics, which is to say a *typology of imminent modes of existence*, replaces Morality, *which always refers existence to transcendent values*.”⁷

This distinction, between an abstract law and “a more properly ethical conception of the relationship to the Other,” is essential, the more so because, conceptually at least, we still remain under the sway of the force of the moral ambition. So dominant indeed is this model that it both encourages a countervailing stance — the denial of morality, the “freeing” of design and technique or technology in its autonomy from the confines of moral law (a recurring ideal expressed in architecture and design since the early nineteenth century) — and

5) In formulating this contrast I have drawn on a number of recent essays on ethics, notably Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Seyla Benhabib, “The Generalized and Concrete Other,” in *Feminism As Critique: Essays on the Politics of Gender in Later-Capitalist Societies*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); John Rajchman, *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan and the Question of Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

6) “Morality designates any attempt to spell out how one determines a right way to behave, behavioral norms which, once determined, can be translated into a system of rules.” Cornell, *Philosophy of the Limit*, 13.

7) Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 23 (my emphasis).

8) The textual instance, from the conservative side, nasty though it is, is David Watkin's splendid essay *Morality and Architecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). With gross exaggeration and distortion, Watkin registers acute disapproval of attempts to weld modern architecture to moral rightness.

9) Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967).

10) Mauss, *The Gift*, 26-27.

11) Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

makes it difficult to free the notion of the ethical from the occlusions, suspicions, and obloquy which an emphasis on morality induces.⁸

Where this comes back to the object is that in turning from the abstract law imposed from without ("form follows function") to an exploration of "imminent modes of existence" of things and subjects, one is not turning away from the processes of designing and making but toward them. It is imminence, not abstraction, that describes the intimate involvement with the thing and its configuration that characterizes the design attempt at establishing both a configurational and a psychological "fit" between a thing and the subjects who will make use of that thing.

This brings us back to the gift — which is, also, of course, the opening of a relation of imminence. Marcel Mauss made it clear in his classic essay on the gift⁹ that gift exchange is inherently a multivalent phenomenon — "one whose transactions are at once economic, juridical, moral, esthetic, religious, and mythological." To put it another way, we can say that the gift (in the full sense of the term) not only establishes concrete relations with the other, it opens up those relations to other kinds of exchange. Thus, far from limiting relations, the gift expands relations.

It is the same with the object-as-gift. The mundane-object-as-gift-object passes both among and between people. Moreover, it renews itself with use (only placed in a museum is it an aberration). And again, once used it is let go — in order that, freed of some of the material problems of sentience, we can move on to other "more human" activities. As we have said, even the apparent "impersonality" of the relationship involved here is significant because it frees the relations involved between ourselves and things of negative personal relations. What this means in turn is that we are not embedded with and by things. All of this is the opposite to "consumption" in the economic sense. The gift-object is a positive circularity, an agent of (subtle) reciprocity, which could also be understood, at once literally and analogically, as a "reservoir of available life."¹⁰

9. That objects are potentially gifts in this last sense of the term we can also understand if we remember that one common denominator to all notions of the gift, even perhaps the most debased, is that the recipient of the gift is just that, a recipient. The receiver cannot buy the gift, nor even acquire it by an act of will. As Lewis Hyde reports in his interesting essay, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*,¹¹ gifts are bestowed, not bought. The purchaser can buy the object, but the moment "within" the object, which is giftlike in the positive sense referred to at the beginning of this essay, is supplementary to the object as commodity (which is again why the gift-article, which attempts to bind commodity and gift, fails). In other words, this moment of the "gift" cannot be bought. Insofar as it inheres in the object, it

is the work or consequence not of the purchaser but the maker and designer.

To put it another way, we can say that, in effect, all commodities, all products, are subject to an act of choice as to whether they may potentially function as a true gift. This implies that the difference between “gift-objects” and products is not a difference of types of object, but of the *conditions of things* (which includes the conditions of how we receive and understand things to be). Most, if not all, gift-articles are not gifts in this sense. Equally, most mundane objects contain (or may potentially contain) a moment of the “gift” in the second, better, sense of the term.

But insofar as products can contain this giftlike quality, it is because this moment is given to, or is bestowed on, the object by the designer/maker. The gift the designer/maker offers here is not inconsiderable. But it is less directly material than it is perceptual. As with Scarry’s lightbulb, which offers itself as the “materialization of a counter-factual perception about the dependence of human sight on the rhythm of the earth’s rotation,” *it is the quantum of the designer’s creative apperception of the conditions of human subjectivity, together with his or her ability to translate and embody this apperception into the form of the object and to offer it again to the potential user, that marks the designer/maker’s “gift” to the user.*

10. This “other” (the user) to whom the product-as-gift is offered is not that of the “other” considered as an abstracted economic unit or as a statistical moment. This is a substantial concrete human other, an other who is thought of (whether explicitly or not) in something of the terms that Adorno has the real giver thinking of the receiver when he reminds us, in the quotation we began with, that “real giving ha[s] its joy in imagining the joy of the receiver. It means choosing, expending time, going out of one’s way, thinking of the other *as a subject*: the opposite of distraction.”

This formulation of the other who one designs and makes for, *as a concrete* other, a real imagined recipient, has echoes to the recent reformulation of ideas of the subject both in ethics in general (where the stress is on the “other” considered not as a generalized abstract other — a subject in the *formal* sense of the term — but substantively)¹² and in feminist theory.

Seyla Benhabib, in her much-quoted essay,¹³ has recently characterized the shifts in thinking involved here as the shift from a model of the generalized (abstract) other to the standpoint of the *concrete other*. This shift involves a move from the model of the subject as an abstract rational consciousness, disembodied and disembedded, possessing formal rights and requiring the legal and political recognition of their formal equality as subjects,¹⁴ to a standpoint on the other which, in her terms, requires us to view all subjects as “individual[s] with a concrete history, identity, and affective-emo-

12) In ethical theory, it is the relation to the other that is often said to be the counter to idealism. This is a point Jacques Lacan notes in regard to Freud; see his *Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 58. It was noted earlier and more extensively by Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927). On de Beauvoir, see chapter 3 of Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity & Society* (New York: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

13) Benhabib, "The Generalized and Concrete Other."

14) But *not* necessarily any recognition of their substantive rights, for example. The difference between formal and substantive rights is essential here. The force of moral and legal theory in the modern period has been to establish the formal (i.e., the abstract political and economic) rights of the possessive individual. The weakness of this moral (and legal and political) theory is that formal rights are not connected to substantive rights. Thus, for example, one may have a formal right to a vote, or to possess property, but no substantive right (e.g., to a job, to free or decent health care, to an education, to adequate shelter). We are so used to thinking in terms of formal (or procedural) rights and so unused to terms of substantive rights, that we have only very inadequate ways of trying to deal with a person's substantive rights. The political problem, in the wide sense, in the coming decades will be to establish substantive rights and to balance these with what has been achieved through the development of abstract formal rights.

15) Benhabib, "The Generalized and Concrete Other," 87.

tional constitution," to "comprehend the needs of the other, his or her motivations, what s/he searches for, and s/he desires."

This is a standpoint of mutuality, of "equity and complementary reciprocity" and is based on the idea that "each of us is entitled to expect and assume from the other forms of behavior through which the other feels recognized and confirmed as concrete, individual beings with specific needs and capacities."¹⁵

These formulations are doubly significant in this context. First, they announce in general a decisive turn in ethical theory: a turn away from (abstracted) morality toward a more concrete and substantial concern with ethical relations between subjects. Second, and of massive relevance to design, the model of the subject developed here is far more congruent with a designer's instinctive understanding of the actualities of the subjects he or she designs for than the older model of the "abstract generalized other."

The latter, the nominal subject of law, science, and indeed of all thought in the modern period, has always been problematic for design. Modernism's worst moments came when it embraced too closely and too slavishly this model, to take one example. Although the model of the abstract other *formally* recognizes the other as a being who has "concrete needs, desires and effects," in practice this essentially disembodied and disembedded schema gave us a conception of the subject whose "embodiedness" was all too easily rationalized and reduced — say, to a set of ergonomic criteria.

The model of the "concrete other" by contrast, though itself not without problems, is congruent with our being able to think of subjects as embodied and effective in qualitative, concrete terms. In other words, it lets us think of subjects as, indeed at best, a product designer will think of the potential user. This is also, of course, how the giver thinks of the receiver. The giver begins from a desire to give. But that desire becomes real only when the giver moves to the imaginative apprehension of the other's needs and desires.

But once the giver does so move, the process of choosing the gift/designing the object becomes a double process of confirmation and affirmation. The act of thinking of the other in this way confirms and affirms both the relationship with the other and our own work. To put it in subject terms: as I anticipate the other's enjoyment and use of my object, and as I concretize those anticipations in an object that I choose/create, then I get the immediate pleasure and consciousness of having satisfied a real human need through this creative work.

In a more abstract sense I receive the pleasure of understanding that I (the giver) through my gift/object will be experienced by you (the receiver/user) as an augmentation of, and even as a necessary part of, yourself. Thus, as Marx puts it in an early commentary, in some rather beautiful sentences: In this process "I would know myself to be confirmed in your thought as well as in your love. I would know that I had created through my life expres-

16) The quotation comes from some notes by Marx on James Mill in the *Notebooks*, Appended to the *Pariser Manuskripte*. They are not published in the English translations. This version comes from Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm & Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 63-64.

sion immediately yours as well. Thus in my individual activity I would know my true essence, my human, common essence is contained and realized. Our production would be so many mirrors, in which our essence would be mutually illuminated.”¹⁶

This seems a suitable ambition for what the making of things might once again become, if the moment of the gift-object (rather than the gift-article) were to become the chief analogy by which we could define the character of the things we make.

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