Interconnection as an ethic of generosity

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A Thesis

Entitled

Interconnection as an Ethic of Generosity

By

Jeanne Kusina

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the Master of Philosophy Degree

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Graduate School

The University of Toledo

May 2004
An Abstract of

Interconnection as an Ethic of Generosity

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The significance that establishing relationships holds for ethical theory can be evidenced in the network culture that is emerging in contemporary society. John Rawls’ Contractarianism, despite its aim to be an ethic of “justice and fairness,” is not always capable of addressing the broad range of human qualities and virtues as is required in a complex world. Thus, I explore alternatives to Contractarianism, such as the moral particularity of Iris Murdoch, Lawrence Blum, and others as well as the corporeal generosity of Rosalyn Diprose. I then propose my own Mutualist model of generosity that asserts an appreciation for intimacy and symbolic exchange, the acceptance of risk, and above all, a commitment to an authentic responsiveness to others. Through an examination of the aesthetic of networked art, I show that an ethic of interconnectedness can be established through acts of generosity.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................. ii
Acknowledgments ........................................ iii
Table of Contents ........................................ iv
I. Introduction: Ethics in the Digital Information Age ................................. 1
II. Chapter 1: Network Culture and Interconnectivity .................................... 11
III. Chapter 2: Generosity as a Starting Point for an Interpersonal Ethic .......... 33
IV. Chapter 3: Art and the Eternal Network .................................................. 57
V. Conclusion: Ethics and Aesthetics .............................................................. 73
VI. Works Cited ............................................. 79
Introduction

Ethics in the Digital Information Age

In contemporary philosophy, there has been a great deal of discussion surrounding the disintegration of barriers between the public and private realms. The globalization of commerce, communication, and media has expanded at such a rapid pace that the current times are frequently referred to as the Digital Information Age. Instead of a delay between events and information, comprehensive media coverage is both omnipresent and unremitting. The Internet, cellular telephones, and other broad-reaching communications technology transfer data and ideas at an unparalleled rate. Information formally considered confidential, such as medical records, financial data, and other statistics of a highly personal nature are now warehoused as references, stored for future purposes, or sold as intellectual property. In the United States, Social Security numbers, which were at one time considered a rarely disclosed method of identification, are being requested and subsequently provided with increasing frequency to numerous institutions. Identification numbers such as these serve as associative links to even greater amounts of personal facts, figures, or archives. Furthermore, the persons or groups who are gaining access to these broad ranges of informational categories vary according to a widely unpredictable scheme of authority. These authorities may or may not ask permission of the persons to whom the records pertain. At the same time, other information of a less sensitive nature is being disseminated and propelled in large
quantities into a burgeoning digital-oriented culture that embraces the paperless platform as a vital means of human communication. Although the purpose of this thesis is not to specifically address rights of privacy such as who has the right to access certain kinds of information, I introduce these examples as indicators that the rapidly changing issues of privacy are a contributing factor to a feeling of estrangement from society.

While a digitally driven lifestyle is becoming increasingly more commonplace and accepted, it is but one small indicator of a larger societal reorganization. Gradually, strict demarcations between the public and private, the home and the workplace, and perhaps even the inner and outer realms of individual thought are all becoming blurred. Philosophy itself, and ethics in particular, must address the new questions and challenges posed by these transformations.

Critiques of contemporary society have, since the modern age, frequently focussed upon a perceived de-evolution of human existence brought upon by technologies that are regarded as inherently alienating.¹ For example, robotics and computers are the major driving force behind recent unprecedented increases in workplace productivity. This often leads to large-scale displacements of human workers who must often seek new jobs only after attending retraining programs that will enable them to work together with the new technology. Thus the human returning to the job market is that much further removed from any actual form of production. Due to the rise of service-based or information-oriented industries, an observation sometimes made is that a substantial number of people do not really make anything any more. The division between those who have access to current technology and those that do not is

¹ Alienation is used here and throughout in a general sense, referring to a feeling of isolated detachment or social severance, and should not be considered in a specifically Marxian or other philosophical context.
frequently referred to by the media as the “digital divide.” Much of the progress that was once deemed the accomplishment of humans is now being credited to technology. Technology is advancing productivity to all new levels the result of which has been the displacement of large numbers of workers. Before reentering the job market, these workers must often go through career retraining that will allow them to operate the new technology. When they return to the workforce, they are a step removed from the creation process. Especially as portrayed in the mass media, the advances once credited to human accomplishment are now attributed to technology.

Does the rush to mass projection lead to the distortion of truth as well as the steady erosion of the ability to investigate, question, and engage in dialogue? The protracted delivery of the paper letter is replaced by the efficient swiftness of electronic mail. Yet some assert that the benefits gained in time come at a cost to intimacy. An instantaneous reporting of events through global media appears to unite a common world through simultaneous viewing of an event. Even the seeming innocuous cellular telephone raises problems regarding the appropriateness of its use in every conceivable situation. Although it appears as if individuals are theoretically more connected to each other than ever before, are they if fact more alienated?

It seems as if it would be both hasty and incorrect to blame the ills of society solely on its rapidly increasing complexity. The demonization of technology is a clichéd scapegoat that should be put out of its misery. Even still, this characterization continues today in the form of a misguided tendency to insist that even as these innovative technologies and methods of exchange are expanding into new dimensions, the human subject remains largely static amidst an otherwise dynamic universe. Advocates of this
position seem to suggest that individual persons can no longer “keep up” with the rapid changes of the world and are thus condemned to play the roles of passive, relatively helpless victims.

What I discern to be a key factor in the development of this mistaken perception is a proclivity by each age to use traditional methods of exchange as a means to define and value human relations. As I will show in Chapter One through an explication of anthropological and philosophical texts, that which begins in ancient cultures as a gift exchange steeped heavily in symbolic and aesthetic qualities gives way to a societal immersion in the notion of commerce. This outlook lends itself to the conjecture that virtually every human endeavor can become subject to commodification in some form. In this manner, all activities are then subject to the rules and dictates of simple economics wherein there is always a debit/credit correlation between a self and a perceived other. Consequently, the dominant ideal of the methodological individual who thinks from a purely rational state obscures the value placed upon a community constituted in relation to its members as well as other groups. As will also be shown in Chapter One, a strictly methodological individual such as the typically Western “man of reason” is open to a number of criticisms, largely because of what is viewed as a bias towards the public over the private realms of life. What then results from drastically elevating the status of the rational person who removes all emotional attachment from ethical perceptions is a barrier to developing authentic interconnectedness and openness to others.

In the case of a contract or a system of justice, which has a basic debtor/creditor relation, it seems as if an initial separation is established. That is, in order to understand
who owes what to whom, we need to remove all intimacy and emotions from the situation. This is not very difficult in cases such as when someone buys a television from a store and defaults on the payments. It becomes extremely complicated, however, when such systems try to determine who “owns” a cryopreserved embryo when a couple is no longer together. Is it possible to fairly divide a future child between two persons? Should the embryo be considered a future child at all, or should it be viewed strictly as genetic material? In another illustration, we may consider which member of an extended family has the right to decide when life support systems may be terminated. Certainly in such matters it may be possible to determine which living relative is, in a strictly legal sense, genealogically closest to the terminally ill patient. However, this could very well bypass such issues as who is closest to the dying individual emotionally, or who might have served as a long-term caregiver. In such cases and in numerous others, it appears as though ethical decisions should not be made in a stringently rational manner, if by that rationality we mean an analysis of the situation that is completely devoid of the human emotion involved.

When discussing these types of circumstances, it is common to encounter claims that technology has gotten out of control. Nonetheless, instead of faulting technology, perhaps we need to re-examine the methods of Contractarian ethics that seem ill-equipped to adequately address the complexities that often appear in relationships. Despite Contractarianism’s noble efforts to be fair and impartial to all, such utopian philosophies inevitably end up unbalanced and inequitable. Hence I assert that technology is not causing a divide between individuals in a community; rather, the divide already exists in commodified societies and technology is being employed as a
means of serving it. The alienation attributed to the complexity of society is only symptomatic. In actuality, it is the privileging of personal detachment as a means to ethical decision making that keeps persons from interacting in an authentic, responsive manner.

Before moving to an evaluation of our current ethical situation, it is first necessary to examine how this new digital era is characterized by dynamic, emerging networks. These networks are constantly shifting and expanding, altering their course of direction and, in general, are continuously adapting to the needs of their participants. Mark C. Taylor compares the development of a networked society to what he views as the previous culture of the twentieth century Cold War era:

The Cold War system was designed to maintain stability by simplifying complex relations and situations in terms of a grid with clear and precise oppositions: East/West, left/right, communism/capitalism, etc. This is a world in which walls seem to provide security. Walls and grids, however, offer no protection from spreading webs; as webs grow, walls collapse and everything begins to change.²

In many regards, network culture does exceed metaphoric walls or grid-like structures of organization and enjoys an existence of its own beyond any specific unchanging external composition.

Networks themselves are hardly a new innovation, and have existed in varying capacities and forms throughout history. Canals, railroads, roadways, and postal routes, though designed officially for transport and trade, were all early facilitators of unofficial interaction. They often ended up moving more than what was initially intended, be they commodities or communication. Letters have frequently served as a means of

introduction by proxy. Written from one friend or acquaintance to another, they often act as a voucher for the character of a third party. As literacy became more common and widespread, libraries made possible a shared system of books and other materials. When certain goods are scarce or rationed, black markets typically arise and function as underground economies. These examples notwithstanding, at no previous time has the world ever been as extensively interconnected as it is today.

A contemporary network is not limited by established methods of transaction. It allows for communication with a number of persons or groups at one time. Information may be relayed in a multi-directional fashion, or stored in a single location for access via links which are scattered amongst various hubs within the network. Network culture then, in my view, takes these types of networked relationships and extrapolates them into everyday human existence. As Taylor suggests, it is indeed an erratic progression. Yet this instability, or *flexibility*, is precisely what may be its greatest strength.

The development of a network culture has drastically altered the way people live their lives as well as the methods and means by which they interact with each other as persons and groups. As Lopez, Almendral, and Sanjuan report, complex networks that at one time may have primarily been the interest of scientists are now shaping not only transdisciplinary studies but also transforming even some of the most elemental aspects of human interaction:

Networks are everywhere in the real world. In the past few years there have been numerous publications in different scientific and technological disciplines such as: neurobiology, the metabolic pathways, the food webs in ecology, the world wide web (WWW), the social interactions, etc. One of the most interesting applications of this tool is the description of economic relationships. The global
economy is a network of national economies, which are themselves networks of markets, which are, in turn, networks of interacting producers and consumers.³

This transformation is not necessarily good or bad in and of itself so much as it is a description of current affairs. Lacking any dedication to an ethic that will function in such a fluid societal arrangement, network culture could very likely result in increased alienation, dissatisfaction, and mistrust. My position, which I will discuss later at more length, is that it would be a grievous error to assert an extreme Impartialist ethic wherein a state of detachment overrides a commitment to relationships. Network culture, by its very nature, continually restructures itself around such rigid frameworks that would treat persons, from a distance, as essentially interchangeable.

What is necessary, then, is to develop an ethic that encompasses the basic interconnectivity amongst persons while remaining flexible enough to adapt to and be a catalyst for the rapid changes of the times. It is my contention that this should be accomplished through a dedication to and the conscientious cultivation of an ethic of generosity.

Generosity, as described by Roselyn Diprose is, “not one virtue among others but the primordial condition of personal, interpersonal, and communal existence.”⁴ As I will explicate in Chapter Two, Diprose’s model of corporeal generosity speaks to a very base-level interconnectivity amongst persons. From what she characterizes as an ambiguous overlapping of human bodies, Diprose is then able to extend the principles of this basic virtue toward a more complex interpretation aimed at achieving generosity between political bodies.

By employing examples from the Aboriginal situation in Australia, it will become evident that traditional justice-oriented approaches to human relationships preclude a meaningful reintegration between the individual and society. Meaningful reintegration becomes impossible when justice dictates that society at large must always be viewed as at least partially external to each person or political body. In addition, any successful process of reintegration must not be absorptive, as if a stronger culture or ideology could simply exterminate the weaker, and should instead allow for creative growth. Even much more radical approaches toward achieving social progress will need to address these issues.

While my thinking regarding an ethic of generosity is informed by and highly indebted to Diprose, I do recognize a potentially different path as an alternative approach and will move somewhat away from her corporeal position. As a result, I will develop my own Mutualist viewpoint, which will acknowledge associations based upon shared dependencies and assert a forward-looking allegiance to a generosity which is always beyond mere reciprocity. In addition to this commitment to generosity, key elements of my Mutualist position will include a legitimate receptiveness and response to others, the recognition of symbolic exchange or gestures, an appreciation for intimacy, and an acceptance of risk.

While I will also present strategies for the implementation of my Mutualist model of generosity, I am in no way claiming that the adoption of this ethic will solve all of the world’s problems or put an end to every unwarranted imbalance or state of unrest. This would be unreasonable and foolishly utopian. However, what I do claim is that this

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model will serve us better than some of the methods we currently employ. Generosity is not free from risk, yet it is a risk that is ultimately worth taking.

Chapter Three will be devoted to a discussion of networked art. Networked artists and aficionados engage in an aesthetic that is largely exemplary of generous concepts in action. Although these artists have often been seen as operating on the fringes of the art world, their intimate networking activities are also frequently hailed as being ahead of their time. In my estimation, networked art will provide one indication that it is not only possible to form a theoretical ethic based predominantly on generosity, but that it will in due course demonstrate that this generosity is beneficial to both the reasonably insular art world as well as society at large.

My goal for this project is to establish an ethic of generosity that recognizes a history of symbolic exchange and celebrates intimacy. This ethic agrees to take risks, and in doing so, seeks to develop authentic relationships with others while demonstrating its capacity to effect a complex, sophisticated world in a significant and pervasive manner.
Chapter One

Network Culture and Interconnectivity

“One thing is certain: both the graffitists and the muralists sprang up after the repressions of the great urban riots of 1966-70. Like the riots, graffiti was a savage offensive, but of another kind, changing content and terrain. A new type of intervention in the city, no longer as a site of economic and political power, but as a space-time of the terrorist power of the media, signs, and the dominant culture.”

-- Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*

In the age of Internet, digital media, and numerous other rapidly expanding technologies, there is a sense of unparalleled interconnectedness amongst persons across the globe. For the most part, even the remotest locations can be charted with global positioning units and contact may be established with the aid of highly advanced satellite technology. Breakthroughs in science and medicine are helping humans in ways scarcely imaginable even decades earlier. It is an exciting time of innovation.

Simultaneously, many of these new advancements are raising an extensive list of ethical questions. What level of electronic surveillance is appropriate for public spaces? Is it ethical to perform certain medical procedures simply because we can? Should everyone be implanted with an identification chip? It seems as if even in matters of ethics, it is possible to lose the human element within the decisions we are making.

Amidst all of this alleged interconnectivity, there is often a feeling of personal detachment. It is fairly common to encounter news stories and letters to the editor of newspapers that reveal a significant number of references to alienation. At times they are political, such as when people do not believe that their governments are recognizing their interests and opinions. At other times the references are technological in nature and involve persons expressing extreme discontent regarding attempts to understand
their retirement fund accounts, the complexities of the latest tax code, or even how to make sense of a surprisingly complicated telephone bill. When people try to address these matters, quite often their first obstacle to overcome is the navigation of some sort of automated response system. Although these kinds of systems were designed to streamline procedures, the results are often viewed less than favorably by those who are forced to interface with them. It is not uncommon to hear people complain quite bitterly that they put forth a great deal of effort in contacting a person or a company only to be left feeling frustrated or disappointed because in the end they were never able to speak to another human being. Such common predicaments increase the perceived digital divide not only between humans and technology but also as a barrier to human interaction itself. One might ask where, inside this fast-paced world, are we to place the virtues of compassion, benevolence, or altruism? Or have we failed to find a way to digitize them?

Placing the blame on technology, digital or otherwise, is hardly a fresh tactic and I believe it would be a mistake to take this approach. It makes no more sense to hold digital technologies accountable for a perceived feeling of societal estrangement than to fault Bell’s telephone or any other mechanical device. Technology is ethically neutral, and only humans have the capacity to act in manners that are morally praiseworthy or otherwise. A person may kill someone else by tossing a toaster into the bathtub with that person, but it would be ridiculous to hold an inanimate object complicit in the murderous act. Hence it seems equally foolish to attribute moral qualities to any form of technology, whether it be a “lifesaving” drug or a potentially “evil” laser beam. However, it would also be an error to ignore the influence that these technologies continue to have on society. Networking technology in particular plays a key role in the
continuous reshaping of human interaction. One obvious example of this can be seen in
the World Wide Web, a global set of connections and linkages that continually modifies
and restructures itself. At the fast-paced speed in which technology is advancing, even
the Web is starting to appear a bit dated, as emerging wireless networks take us into
even broader frontiers.

Technology alone does not create a situation that requires an ethical solution.
What has become a problem, I will argue, is that for far too long a notion of detachment
has been privileged in ethical decision making. Regardless of what methods people use
to interact with each other, ethical theories that promote a strict agency geared toward
equality sometimes, due to aspirations to achieve equivalence, inadvertently advance a
high degree of personal extrication from situations. This personal distancing can
ultimately limit one’s ability to relate to others in a receptive and sincere way. As a way
of illustrating my point, I shall examine John Rawls’ contractarianism and consider the
challenges raised to his theory by moral particularists. This discussion will then be
situated against a number of the foremost political, sociological, and historical
discussions on ethical exchange, taking into account their ethical implications for the
issues at hand. The possibilities that remain open to contemporary thinkers include an
honest receptivity to others, an increased capacity for intimacy, generosity, and an
appreciation for symbolic exchange.

**Impartialism Versus Particularism: Exchange and Interchangeability**

The Impartialist approach to ethics is often considered to be the paradigm for
contemporary political institutions, economic systems, and legal entities. Broadly stated,
Impartialism unites the elements of Mill’s consequentialism and Kant’s nonconsequentialism, bridging their differences over a theory of moral value. Yet Impartialism itself may not necessarily be viewed as a singular or exact moral philosophy and perhaps may be looked upon as existing on a continuum. Extreme forms of Impartialism, as described by Susan Wolf, are notably strict in their ethical applications:

According to Extreme Impartialism, a person is morally required to take each person’s well-being, or alternatively each person’s rights, as seriously as every other, to work equally hard to secure them, or to care equally much about them, or to grant them equal value in her practical deliberations.  

In its most radical forms, Impartialism requires such excessive amounts of objectivity that even for parents to consider the welfare of their own children over the welfare of stranger’s children would be viewed as morally unacceptable. To many, this may seem counterintuitive if not impossible. As Wolf continues to discuss, however, there are ways of moving away from Extreme Impartialism and toward a moderate Impartialism.  

More moderate Impartialist theories primarily seek to manage conflict through universal principles that develop a scheme of reciprocity founded in the principle of fairness. Such theories acknowledge that familial or other contextualized relationships do exist. Nevertheless, adherents to these theories still insist that relationships must be accounted for within a system that claims ethical actions should always result from at least a largely impartial point of view without regard to the interests of an individual. Therefore, we may continue to examine how well even moderate Impartialists respond

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6 Wolf 245.
to the reality that these relationships do exist and do influence the way persons lead their lives.

Although various thinkers have taken an Impartialist approach, it is nearly impossible to consider contemporary ethical philosophy without taking into account the impact of John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*. A society regulated by Rawlsian methodology would make choices only after removing all personal attachment to a given situation. Essentially, his “veil of ignorance” operates on the regulative principle that persons could find themselves situated anywhere within society, therefore all decisions must consider every individual’s wellbeing and inclinations. In other words, fairness requires equality. All interests should be weighed uniformly and without prejudice, not unlike agreements entered into in contractual situations. Rawls presents his doctrine as being one that provides adequately for the interests of all:

But for one who understands and accepts contract doctrine, the sentiment of justice is not a different desire from that to act on principles that rational individuals would consent to in an initial situation which gives everyone equal representation as a moral person. Nor is it different from wanting to act in accordance with principles that express men’s nature as free and equal rational beings (*TofJ*, §72, 418).

According to Rawls, the end result is a fair and well-ordered society that justly protects the liberties and interests of everyone equally. Exchange operates on two levels here. First, the veil of ignorance mandates interchangeability. Second, contractarianism would provide for the protection of the weaker against a dominant or more formidable opponent by creating an exchange system that is designed to protect the interests of even the least fortunate members of society.

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However, I maintain that this is a highly idealized point of view that is open to criticism on a number of fronts. To begin, despite its claims of universal equanimity, Rawls’ philosophy privileges the Western standpoint of the intellectual “man of reason,” a lineage criticized by contemporary feminist philosophers. One prejudicial split is evidenced in the views taken towards what is defined as the public, male domain (of politics, business and action) and the private, women’s realm of the home (functioning something like a secondary “support staff” for the family). One philosopher who has examined this topic at length is Virginia Held. Held cites her own work as well as Genevieve Lloyd and others in order to criticize a development of 17th and 18th century thinkers for valuing as “good” anything that is in favor of perpetuating the existing power structure and considered “bad” to be anything that threatened it.8 The buttressing of the dominant ideals of a male power structure came to shape the traditional philosophical genealogy of moral and scientific thinking with a bias toward valuing all things deemed public and active while treating traditionally private roles as secondary and insignificant. All the spoils of success go to the Impartial, reasonable public individual, who makes ethical decisions without acknowledging any debt to or mutuality between persons in relationships.

A similar but slightly different criticism is raised by care ethicists who stress the social and political implications of extricating the human aspect of caring and interpersonal relationships from traditional models of justice. As the term “care ethics” suggests, the difficulties are probably most evident in the undervaluing of custodial care or the work of secondary health care providers and guardians. However, the same

principles may be applied to a broader spectrum of work created outside of the public domain. For example, we might consider the history of underrepresentation in major art institutions of work by people of color, women, and self-taught artists. These artists often painted, sculpted, or created quilts and other so-called crafts from within their homes and without access to larger forums. Therefore, they could potentially be viewed as having been disenfranchised at least partially as a result of the same concerns that are noted by the care ethic perspective. Because justice theories such as the one presented by Rawls favor the total objectivity and independence associated with a “work ethic” care ethicists believe that they diminish the value of work done for anything other than (public) production. Instead of fostering equal participation in standard contracts and practices, workers and caregivers that function outside of the public realm of production and expenditure slip through the cracks and remain politically underrepresented, since they can offer nothing of equal worth in a system of public exchange. Although a critic of the initial formulations of care ethics, Joan Tronto contends that justice and care need not be viewed as antagonistic:

An argument that stands in the way of revaluing care is the presumed distinction between care and justice, and the assumption that if one takes care seriously then justice will be displaced. This assumption arises from the view that caring and justice arise out of two different metaethical starting points, and are thus incompatible.\(^9\)

Tronto’s goal is not, however, to simply replace the esteem awarded to justice as a system of exchange value with one of care and gifting, but to promote the notion that they should not be considered as mutually exclusive. Rather, it is to recognize the merit

of the justice model while no longer placing a premium on the self-determining, public
individual over the interconnected nature of society.

Thus, politically astute care ethicists like Tronto as well as feminist philosophers
agree that, although it may initially appear difficult to critically challenge a philosophy
whose end result pledges equality and justice, Rawls’ theory does have its limitations.
The chief point that must be measured is, even if Rawls’ goal is taken to be respectable,
is it the best one philosophically? My foremost objection to Rawls’ contractarianism is
that it does not adequately take contextualized relations into consideration, particularly
with regard to how they affect our moral choices. When Rawls suggests that every
person begin moral deliberation from the position behind a veil of ignorance, the
allegation made is that since one does not know what standing one has in society then
individual interests will be squelched and fairness can be achieved. Even if we assume
this ignorance is possible, it remains open as to whether or not such a sweeping
departure from all forms of particular knowledge is as beneficial or even as possible as
he would like us to believe. David Lewis Schaefer is not convinced by Rawls and
believes that Rawls recognizes the potential problems in his theory but fails to provide
an adequate response:

Rawls anticipates the objection “that the exclusion of nearly all particular
information makes it difficult to grasp what is meant by the original position”
(138). To this argument he replies that “one… can at any time enter this position
or… simulate the deliberations of this hypothetical situation, simply by reasoning
in accordance with the appropriate restrictions” (138). But is it at all possible to
reason in this manner? Can human beings possess any general knowledge
without having derived or at least developed this knowledge from the study of
particulars… One might pretend or deceive oneself into believing that he had
forgotten his particular beliefs and characteristics, but this pretense would not
have the radically neutralizing effects Rawls desires. Furthermore, even if one
could engage in this kind of temporary, partial memory lapse, it is doubtful that
one would have any meaningful general knowledge left with which to deliberate.\textsuperscript{10}

This type of Impartialism, in its concreteness, is a philosophical approach that lacks intimacy and sees no need for personal interaction or shared understanding with others. Since ethics itself is the branch of philosophy regarding human moral behavior, it seems odd that some theorists would go to such lengths to remove as many human-specific aspects as possible from the theories they propose.

Moral particularists such as Lawrence Blum and Margaret Urban Walker, by contrast, believe that ethical decision making is anything but universal and instead has a great deal to do with how to respond to certain individuals. In some respects, their work follows ideas first expressed by Iris Murdoch. Murdoch finds fault with theories that base personal responsibility on the notion or desire to reason one’s way to action as impersonally as possible.\textsuperscript{11} After likening such approaches to a person going into a store and choosing between moral actions as if they were neutral products within a strictly public sphere that denies any moral value to the “inner life,” she concludes:

I find the image of man I have sketched above both alien and implausible. That is, more precisely: I have simple empirical observations (I do not think people are necessarily or essentially “like that”), I have philosophical objections (I do not find their arguments convincing), and I have moral objections (I do not think people \textit{ought} to picture themselves in this way).\textsuperscript{12}

For many theorists working after Murdoch, particularism provides at least a \textit{prima facie} justification for moral Partialism. Particularism, according to Blum, is based upon moral perception and that “the moral principles we consciously adopt are in part a reflection of our moral perceiverings, and conversely our moral perceptions are in part


shaped by our consciously adopted moral principles.”  

Whereas Impartialists would claim that there is a right reason to do something regardless of who it is that is affected, particularists claim that there are moral, nonobjective reasons to act differently towards people based upon our perceptions. Expanding upon ideas first expressed in the work of Iris Murdoch, particularists like Blum would extend the moral decision making criteria to include the characteristics of kindness, compassion, or care even when acting towards strangers so long as the deliberation process involves concentrating on the welfare of a particular person in a particular situation and not a hypothetical good for all.

Then again, an argument for particularism as a general alternative to Impartialism is more clearly established by focussing attention on those with whom individuals have relationships. We can see this in the case of friendship. A person might give fifty dollars to a friend but feel no duty whatsoever to give that money to a stranger. She may never expect that friend to offer her money when she needs it or for that matter necessarily believe that her friend is obligated to pay her back at all. Her actions are neither impersonal (as if she would give fifty dollars to anyone) nor personal (as if she would only give the fifty dollars because it is in her own best interest). In Blum’s view, friendship, then, is in its own unique category of moral interaction not captured by Impartialism and exchange-value relations. It is not a polarization of universal principles and personal benefit, but rather exists somewhere in the middle.

A further difficulty of the Rawlsian justice model is that so much of the concept of “fair play” is based upon the creation of and response to moral duty. Everyone who

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12 Murdoch 9.
14 Blum 13.
benefits from a just society must also do their “fair share” in return, and thus everyone is treated as if they were interchangeable (TofJ, §71). Consequently, at the outset, when viewed within the context of a well-ordered society, justice appears to be a worthy cultural standard. Yet a Rawlsian approach is highly dichotomous in nature. It fits comfortably within the hierarchy of traditional economics in that it recognizes richer/poorer, debit/credit, supply/demand and other such oppositions that structure the exchanges in the world. Acts of charity to the disenfranchised are expected as a means of keeping a just balance, but acts of personal generosity are not required or encouraged in excess of contractual situations which should favor the vulnerable. While Democratic Socialists have often embraced some elements of Rawls’ liberalism, Rawls himself tends to waver between socialism and a democratic system that allows for private property ownership:

The mention… of a liberal socialist regime prompts me to add that justice as fairness leaves open the question whether its principles are best realized by some form of property-owning democracy or by a liberal socialist regime. The question is left to be settled by historical conditions and traditions, institutions, and social forces of each country.15

Taking such a neutral position on political issues as well as other matters renders Rawls’ position vulnerable to a number of communitarian critiques. Led by Alisdair MacIntyre, Michael J. Sandel, Charles Taylor, and others, they contend that Rawls has placed too much importance on individualism and not enough on the shared goals of society. One issue that communitarians find particularly troubling is what Sandel describes as Rawls’ notion of a distanced self that is able to make decisions without any reference to age, ethnicity, gender, or community to which that person might be said to

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belong. For Sandel this is viewed as an unrealistic expectation that tends to treat qualities of human character as possessions or foreign commodities:

We can locate this individualism and identify the conceptions of the good it excludes by recalling that the Rawlsian self is not only a subject of possession, but an antecedently individuated subject, standing always at a certain distance from the interests it has. One consequence of this distance is to put the self beyond the reach of experience, to make it invulnerable, to fix its identity once and for all… But a self so thoroughly independent as this rules out any conception of the good (or of the bad) bound up with possession in the constitutive sense. It rules out the possibility of any attachment (or obsession) able to reach beyond our values and sentiments to engage our identity itself. It rules out the possibility of a public life in which, for good or ill, the identity as well as the interests of the participants could be at stake.¹⁶

According to Sandel, the removal of the self from all of its distinguishing characteristics that is required by Rawls’ difference principle functions in denial of the role society plays in shaping individuals. In this interpretation, the individual distancing involved in moral decision making works to sever interpersonal relationships and weaken ties to the community.

Moreover, contrary to Rawls’ conjecture, contemporary society is anything but well-ordered. As previously asserted, it is in fact becoming drastically more diverse as technology helps to propel the active cultural changes that defy conventional definitions. Even the act of determining what is just in a given situation can become an inexact and confusing process. Has the pursuit of an impersonal, justice as fairness model successfully accomplished its goal of becoming the preeminent society? Or do we in fact find ourselves surrounded by more tension, endless litigation, and an imbalance in shortages versus surpluses? While we need not hold contractarianism entirely

responsible for these imbalances, we may nonetheless assert that it fails to realize all of its ambitions.

To explore where contractarianism may reach its limits, I will first turn to the work of anthropologist Marcel Mauss and the investigations involved in forming his influential 1954 essay *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Then I will discuss how Mauss’ claims have been interpreted by a variety of thinkers hoping to escape the mundane trappings of contractual exchanges. I believe that by taking a closer look at the background of exchange, it is possible to begin with the relatively simple concept of the gift and attempt to reconnect with the lost intimacy, interpersonal relationships, and generosity that is precluded by extreme Impartialism.

**Alternatives to Contractarianism: The Gift Exchange Relation**

Like Rawls, Marcel Mauss is highly opposed to utilitarian schemes of valuation and decision-making. Yet Mauss is far from advocating an impartial justice that is based upon the egalitarian redistribution of wealth and the hypothetical removal of actual individuals from methods of moral justification. Mauss carefully examines a wide range of actual societies, their exchange practices, and obligations to give gifts as well as the reciprocal obligations involved in receiving them. He iterates that, in general, the distinct moral purpose of a gift is to create a relational bond and any gift that fails to do so is futile. Yet gift giving can also be part of a wider circle of social and ethical situations, and he illustrates this with his examination of the Northwestern Native American tribes and their tradition of *potlatch*.\(^{17}\) Although there are numerous reasons

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for not endorsing the potlatch as an ethical system, we may still benefit from a
discussion of its practices and the effects it has had on postmodern thought, particularly
in regard to the aspect of symbolic exchange.

Potlatch is a system of exchange wherein the native clans compete with each
other through the act of generosity. In order to preserve honor, every gift offered must
be returned with something of greater value. The reciprocal gift must also be recognized
and responded to, again escalating in value, and the only way to end the cycle is for the
gift to be sacrificed or destroyed in an act of egoistic supremacy. Nonetheless, in order
to secure peaceful relations among clans, as well as the spiritual favors of their gods, the
potlatch simply begins anew. There is no final hierarchy, no absolute victor that
remains for all time.

To illustrate this principle in current terms, consider that a woman gives a bottle
of wine to her neighbor as a gift. While he has no choice but to accept the gift, the
neighbor is now obligated to return it in a manner that asserts his own status. Thus he
responds with a more expensive bottle of champagne. Upon receiving the champagne, a
challenge has been put to the status of the woman. She then purchases a well-crafted
wine rack and gives it to her neighbor. Not to be outdone, he returns the debt with an
even more expensive set of crystal stemware. The woman, realizing that this will go on
indefinitely, wishes to stop the exchange yet still maintain her social rank. Therefore,
rather than simply accepting the gift and admitting inadequacy, she purposefully
destroys the glasses. By denying her attachment to the value of the glasses, she seizes
the power of the moment for herself and resets the cycle of exchange, both transcending
the cycle and resubmitting herself to a system of relations with another.
The difference between the potlatch and a simple system of bartering is that the giving is always unequal. That is, in the potlatch, each person or group gives as much as possible and not as little as necessary in order to secure a fair exchange. One could say that fairness is not equality. Hardly dichotomous in nature, Mauss notes that, “Some tribes have only one word for buying/selling, lending/borrowing” (*Gift*, 32). Giving is not done to the point of the destruction of self or clan, but enough to secure the respect of the recipient and to perpetuate the competitive cycle of giving. The gift, in this respect, has much less to do with any specific utility or economic exchange value so much as it represents symbolic power and an emblematic association with its former owner. According to Mauss, it is beyond mere “commodity” and instead, is the “total” presentation (*Gift*, 30). How does one person relate to another in this intimate and fully personal way? Similarly, by rejecting commodification in favor of a more authentic, symbolic gestures. We shall return to this larger question later, but for now we see that through responsive interpersonal exchanges, customary generosity has a powerful shaping effect upon a social order that can never remain stationary.

Mauss asserts that the current systems of exchange, which seek impersonal, detached economies and social structures, are moral disasters. He calls for a return to *reciprocal generosity* based upon relationships of mutual respect:

Thus the clan, the tribe, and peoples have learnt how to oppose and to give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another. This is what tomorrow, in our so-called civilized world, classes, and nations must learn. This is one of the enduring secrets of their wisdom and solidarity (*Gift*, 83).

Mauss’ typology of the gift exchange reaches a normative conclusion that has had a noteworthy philosophical impact. Mauss is a significant influence on the Structuralists and, in particular, the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. He also provides a
resurgence of inspiration to post-structuralists who find in his work a surprising complexity amongst these so-called “primitive” societies that parallel the growing complexity of their own times.

Georges Bataille employs Mauss’ research in formulating his own thoughts on economy and exchange. He focuses upon the excessive giving and consequential destructive acts of the potlatch, viewing it as dramatically anti-utilitarian and yet also intensely intimate. Potlatch is a means of eliminating, through a ritualistic sacrifice, what he sees as the inevitable, wasteful surpluses needlessly created by society. For Bataille, giving is a way of breaking the traditional order of production and consumption, whether in terms of goods or energy expended by individuals, and always with the purpose of securing a better life. In his view, it is the sovereign who consumes the work of the servile, and the servile who become slaves to the idea of the future. Yet the potlatch, with its ultimate end in the destruction of wealth and value, is an absurd madness that shatters all ties to an idea of ends or of a final perfect state. Regardless of whether this is the Rawlsian perfect state of justice through interchange and the veil of ignorance or the final state of the supreme plutocrat, it nonetheless renders the point of excess expenditure useless. Bataille asserts this position by stating:

> In wealth, what shines through the defects extends the brilliance of the sun and provokes passion. It is not what is imagined by those who have reduced it to their poverty; it is the return to life’s immensity to the truth of exuberance. This truth destroys those who have taken it for what it is not; the least that one can say is that the present form of wealth make a shambles and a human mockery of those who think they own it.\(^{18}\)

The irrational nature and destruction of the potlatch actually serves to counter the

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unintended surpluses and obligations brought about by perceived rationality. Again, what is destroyed and overcome is not a “thing” of value so much as the meaning attached to the exchange and the powerful act of obliteration. In the words of Ben Dorfman, the “act of expenditure” becomes a “transgressive act” that escapes the boundaries of socio-economic systems. The power is transferred to the giver, and the ultimate action is performed by the one who commits the ultimate sacrifice. By ending the economy, true freedom and specific intimacy is achieved. It destroys the notion of the social contract through a close involvement in specific, supererogatory actions.

Symbolic Exchange and the Hyperreal

Many years after Bataille, the world continues to move away from the intimate, and further towards the commodification of the personal. Information has itself become a new form of excess, a surplus of storing names, numbers, and other personal data in a highly formalized manner. Not only has the intimacy associated with giving out this information disappeared, but also the end to the succession of superfluity.

Jean Baudrillard also develops a philosophy that incorporates the legacy of Mauss. Taking a somewhat different tack than Bataille, Baudrillard places a greater emphasis upon the symbolic aspects of exchange. Weighed against material exchange with its system of production and ends, symbolic exchange encompasses the relationship between the provider and the receiver. However, Baudrillard believes that this relationship has been destroyed and substituted with valueless semiotics. In Symbolic

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*Exchange and Death*, he delineates the decline of the symbolic by contrasting it against the rise of three degrees of simulation. The first order of simulacra represents the productive stage and is analogous in character, as in the example of an automaton that resembles a human yet always remains distinct and ultimately answerable to humans. A second order simulacra is reproductive, or equivalent to its maker. This can be observed in the robot, which replaces the human entirely and by doing so gains the upper hand of power. There are no illusions or metaphysics with a machine, hence little error or perceived difficulties caused by subjectivity. It is a thoroughly real reality, or as Baudrillard claims, a reality without appearances wherein humans adapt to the industrial revolution by becoming more machine-like themselves. Personal creation is replaced by a never-ending series of production and reproduction (*SED*, 54).

With the materialization of a consumer culture, human concentration is repositioned toward the product or object and a desire to produce and possess instead of exchange. Nonetheless Baudrillard asserts that there is meaning in the specific act of exchange itself, a meaning within the gap of the reciprocal relationship created as something is given and subsequently received. His view is that meaning, or the making of items for use value has been replaced by reproductive value. In many ways, this is representative of the restructuring of contemporary society, where the productive real no longer exists:

The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a ‘structure’, but an act of exchange and a social relation which puts an end to the real, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary (*SED*, 133).

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Each order of simulation represents a step further away from the human aspects of exchange. Even the re-productive stage of simulation has been surpassed by a third order of simulacrum, the hyperreal. Hyperreality goes beyond the vague and imprecise boundaries between the real and its equivalent reproduction and in fact has a reality all its own (SED, 74). It is a desired reality, no less real because of its abstract nature, for it actually informs our current reality. If the automaton is an imitation of humans and the robot the equivalent, then the hyperreal is the artificially intelligent being, superior to both. It exists solely in the realm of simulation.

As Baudrillard sees it, the world is awash in signs that ultimately have no meaning or “real” to which they refer. It is a complete departure from the potlatch’s emphasis on the symbolic. Instead we are living in a society permeated by the hyperreal, wherein simulations have absorbed everything they once represented. While the automaton of the Baroque mimicked humans, the robot replaced them by absorbing their humanity. Now the “robots”, abandoning functionality, take their direction from the hyperreal. As the technology of the microwave oven replaced the traditional stove, contemporary society longs for the hyperreal oven that will accomplish the same task in half the time. The fact that this is a difference of mere seconds is inconsequential. Humans desire to possess commodities that exhibit the characteristics they have come to value, that is, the desire to become faster, more productive people. This is allegedly accomplished through production, purchase, and consumption. Yet despite all of their efforts, people frequently find themselves alienated and unfulfilled. Material exchange has not delivered “the goods” as promised.
Hyperreality and Network Culture

As technology advances and society becomes increasingly more reliant on the digital, so too does hyperreality swell to the point of replacing the real. Yet technology is neither the villain nor the redeemer of a contemporary society broadening out into networks. Each claim is entirely too simplistic for a world becoming increasingly layered in levels of intricacy and sophistication. Examining the employment of technology, however, can provide insight into our current situation.

Having lost the equilibrium once provided by symbolic exchange, Baudrillard argues that our existence is plagued by imbalances. In his view, giving has become unidirectional and the collective debt accrued grows so quickly that it can never be repaid. He perceives humans as being trapped within a continuous loop of our own production:

We will not destroy the system by a direct, dialectical revolution of the economic or political infrastructure. Everything produced by contradiction, by the relation of forces, or by energy in general, will only feed back into the mechanism and give it impetus, following a circular distortion similar to a Moebius strip (SED 36).

When the ritual of giving is transformed into a system not of return but of accumulation, at the end of the day even justice becomes asymmetrical and meaningless. At best, there is only the enforcement of contracts; at worst there is empty charity, the one-sided non-relational gift which only serves to perpetuate an unremitting disparity of power, crushing the recipient. There is no reversal of fortune and no re-setting of the power structures to zero.

Baudrillard implies that this state of affairs is irreversible. With regard to the nascent network culture of globalization as well as the blurring of private and public boundaries in the information age, he may very well be correct. Nevertheless, is
hyperreality really such a terrible thing? Simply because we cannot overturn the way society is organized does not necessarily mean that we cannot adapt the way we live or effectively alter a changing environment. Specifically addressing Baudrillard’s pessimism on the possibility of transformation, Mark C. Taylor addresses the question as to whether or not the situation is as impossible as Baudrillard would lead us to believe:

The technologies of production and reproduction in network culture are creating strange loops that are transforming rather than destroying differences and oppositions that long seemed secure in a world where screens displace walls, neither maps nor territory, code nor substance, information nor matter, image nor reality, virtuality nor actuality, simulacra nor the real is what it had seemed to be when it was the opposite of its presumed other. Something else, something different, is emerging.  

This notion of emergence is, in my view, precisely the opportunity provided by the rapidly changing technology and global communication in the evolution of contemporary culture. The same may also be true of our cultures of moral and political decision making. While there are distinct difficulties involved in the growing hyperreality surrounding human existence, I do not believe that despondency is the appropriate response. Rather, it is my position that what masks itself as hopelessness is the result of two worlds colliding. The world of hyperreality is coming through the age of simulacra and simulation, yet society is still responding with the typical structures of a justice model of ethics and fixed contractual relations. While it is not viable to return to the potlatch (nor necessarily should this be an aim, for the potlatch itself is riddled with difficulties), it is nonetheless possible to examine the intersections where emerging networks clash with formalized structures. I suggest a move towards investigating the prospects involved in resurrecting the forms of life that have been pushed aside in the

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drive toward mass consumption and commodification: forms of life which seek interchangeable ways of relating to each other as individual human beings. I believe that there is no apparent reason why such a shift would necessarily prohibit a return to intimacy, a positive symbolic exchange, and a commitment to generosity. Above all, I would not encourage merely backward thinking, but insist upon a forward looking philosophy that departs from contractarianism in a manner that does not simply do away with the merits of a justice-oriented ethics but moves beyond its limitations into an innovative, emergent arena of alternatives.
Chapter Two

Generosity as a Starting Point for an Interpersonal Ethic

“Intimately, I belong to the sovereign world of the gods and myths, to the world of violent and uncalculated generosity... I withdraw you, victim, from the world in which you were and could only be reduced to the condition of a thing, having a meaning that was foreign to your intimate nature. I call you back to the intimacy of the divine world, of the profound immanence of all that is.”

-- Georges Bataille, Theory of Religion

I have discussed how the subject of the gift has historically been a topic of investigation for a number of philosophers that still continues to influence the way contemporary thinkers address ethical issues involving exchange. If the gift once constituted the most basic element of ancient or archaic societies, its significance has been usurped by the attention placed upon contractual models of economics. These economic impositions have escalated to the point where they no longer refer only to public exchanges of goods and services. Through their impartial removal of the interpersonal, contractual models have also served to commodify many aspects of human behavior. Instead of leading to a utopian society of justice and fair play, inequity and alienation not only linger but continue to increase.

However, society is made up of individuals. Each person is capable of transgressing one’s own role by asserting the value of the symbolic over mere utility.

22 “Individuals” as referred to here and throughout the paper refers simply to embodied persons in interpersonal relationships and should not be considered as a Rawlsian individual or in another philosophical context.
Through recognition of the benefits of intimacy and a genuine responsiveness to others, each person may begin to strike at the foundations of the current systems in which they are living. Yet they cannot simply mimic the gift-exchanges of the past, and instead must move forward through the practice of giving above and beyond what is considered just. Simply put, I intend to move to a model of generosity. It is generosity that I believe is representative of our fundamental interactions with others and can be explored on a number of levels. Both before and further than law, rationality, or reason, generosity can be found in even the simplest interpersonal relationships.

Recent work in this area is being done by Rosalyn Diprose. Diprose argues that generosity is not just a virtue that an individual may or may not exercise, but is an elementary part of our existence that contributes to an openness to others as well as an overall well-being in society.\(^\text{23}\) While I agree with the essential premise of this thesis, I believe it is necessary to move beyond her exploration of self-concepts based on past injustices in order to take a proactive approach to avoiding future injustices.

By means of a conceptual analysis, I will explore the positive aspects of Diprose’s corporeal generosity as well as its limitations. Particularly deserving of admiration are her efforts towards extrapolating the generous acts of individual human bodies into forms of governmental and cultural bodies. Her vision of developing an openness to others is also to be applauded. However, Diprose’s use of Australia’s Lost Generation may still lead to questions as to whether or not steps toward social justice are intrinsically steps toward political generosity. By looking at a clear definition of generosity and applying it to her examples, I will show that while progress toward

justice might be attained in such situations, generosity might not. This will provide me with the opportunity to introduce my own model of generosity. Using this model, I will then present strategies for implementing generosity in practice, leading to a forward-looking position that recognizes the networked relationships of individuals and political bodies. These include the notion of openness as well as of commitments to others to whom a person has no duty, an understanding of risks and sacrifice, a dedication to avoid self-serving instances of giving, and the active process of forgetting by both the giver and the receiver.

In addition, I will also make use of other current philosophical research concerning generosity as a supererogatory act above and beyond simple giving. I will then present my own view on a simple generosity that, when it is applied frequently and liberally, can contribute to an overall system of associated munificence.

**Giving and Forgetting the Gift**

In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida argues that if a gift were to be recognized and not forgotten, then it becomes a part of an economy and ceases to remain a gift.\(^\text{24}\) Since the cycle of giving and obligation to return the gift is never completed, the gift itself becomes an impossibility. The only way for a gift to be a true gift is for it not to be recognized as such, or to be forgotten.\(^\text{25}\) This is the same whether dealing in commodities or with human relations. For Derrida, the gift remains, like a post card,
always in a process of being sent from one destination to another without ever being able to reside at its destination:

…from the very first envoi: no gift, gift step [pas de don], without absolutely forgetting (which also absolves you of the gift, don, and of the dose), forgetting of what you give, to whom, why and how, of what you remember about it or hope. A gift, if there is one, does not destine itself.26

If the gift is virtually impossible, generosity as opposed to justice seemingly becomes even more difficult to achieve. It would appear that the conceptual scheme and practice of justice has erased the possibility of gifts and generosity. However, by emphasizing corporeality instead of self-identity, Rosalyn Diprose is able to apply Derrida’s concept of forgetting the gift to issues of social justice. Although she concedes that forgetting does occur in historical accounts of gift giving, Diprose contends that it is selective in regard to what gets forgotten:

Emphasizing the way that the gift does its work only by being forgotten and then through the dispersal of presence overlooks, how, in practice, the generosity and the gifts of some (property owners, men, wage earners, whites) tend to be recognized and remembered more often than the generosity and gifts of others (the landless, women, the unemployed, indigenous peoples, and immigrants). It is the systematic, asymmetrical forgetting of the gift where only the generosity of the privileged is memorialized, that social inequities and injustice are based (CG, 8).

For Diprose, the asymmetry of the forgetting of gifts characterizes social injustice. By her account of examples of social injustice, a generosity is portrayed but only as a one-sided affair that favors the dominator and excludes the contributions or gifts of the dominated body.

On my reading of her work, Diprose presupposes that generosity is a virtue and then goes on to argue that, as a virtue, it is not one that an individual may or may not

exercise. She claims that, “…generosity is not one virtue among others but the primordial condition of personal, interpersonal, and communal existence” (CG, 5). What is primordial in this sense erupts through the conceptual schemes which would repress it. Hence Diprose believes that generosity is an elemental part of life that contributes to an overall well being in society. However, as Diprose points out, Derrida does not address issues of social injustice in this manner. He is not interested in making any specific ethical propositions that prescribe any obligation to gifting. Though he does state that for a gift to be a pure gift it must not be done for the personal gain of the giver, he never suggests that anyone should give gifts as a matter of moral duty.27 Giving gifts may be optional, but it is not a moral imperative that a person gives away anything. Yet I argue that this position is lacking in social engagement; generosity is an inherent human quality that is essential to interpersonal relationships.

To state that a person has no moral duty to share or be generous with anyone is not, in my view, morally neutral. While it may be asserted that a person is not obligated to be generous in every situation, steadfastly refusing to be generous at any time is a hostile act. It denies an elemental recognition of the needs of others and instead fosters selfishness. Rather, through an outpouring of gifts or gestures for which we expect no return, generosity acknowledges our interrelated existence with others and allows our identities to overlap. In Diprose’s intercorporeal model, instead of each individual having a unique existence rooted in autonomy, each person is, by virtue of being human, fundamentally linked with others.28 Bodily intercorporeality is a shared point of origin.

28 When Diprose uses the term “corporeal” it is in a bodily sense, first in reference to physical bodies and later to political “bodies”.
Life begins by being linked directly to a parent, and intercorporeality is not something that can be shed or isolated after birth. Consequently, any attempt to interpret reality as if people were entirely distinct entities whose identities should never overlap is unrealistic and morally damaging.

Diprose’s corporeal justice stands in relation to the social contract theories that determine rights and responsibilities based on ascribing exchange values for who may give what of their body to whom and when. Under contract theory, every exchange involves the creation of an obligation. It is the social exchange of discrete products, goods, and bodies that calls into question the ways in which we arrange ourselves in relationships with one another. 29 This theoretical structure makes the possibility of generosity difficult, if not impossible to conceptualize or perform. If bodily integrity is not true to experience, then one must be equally critical of certain feminist philosophies that might mimic what they consider to be a masculine model of bodily integrity. These theorists assume that a woman is free only as long as she gives nothing of herself away to others. 30 Hence, in their views, no one who wishes to maintain one’s dignity would ever give anything away to another.

Yet there are less extreme positions which still imply that anyone who is generous, that is, who gives more than they expect to receive in return, is foolish. Under social contract theory generosity should be avoided, as it would compromise the integrity of the giver. This seems to be the concern of more mainstream feminists. Although we might still be concerned with how gender stereotypes place women’s

29 One issue Diprose addresses specifically is that of surrogate motherhood, objecting to the views of previous thinkers who suggest that such acts damage the mother’s autonomy and alienate or isolate the birth mother from the prospective parents as well as society as a whole (CG, 47-51).
generosity at risk for unjust exploitation, it becomes apparent that instead of safeguarding women’s autonomy it actually limits a woman’s freedom by restricting her choices. What results is a never-ending cycle of interaction that never fully escapes the boundaries of a debtor/creditor correlation.

Instead of commodifying the body in the manner of social contract theory, Diprose sees it as fluid in character and function. To elucidate this she draws heavily on Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ambiguity, as succinctly described by John F. Bannan:

The body is ambiguous, he says, ‘in the experience we have of it, and pre-eminently in sexual experience and through the fact of sexuality.’ In my relations with another person, for example, I may experience myself both as subject (who loves or desires) and object (ashamed before the gaze of the other).[^31]

Hence Merleau-Ponty shows that there is never a permanent body “for me” or “for another,” but rather an unclear intersection of existence. Considered in this manner, a body is never a set, stable, isolated thing. Rather, it is continuously changing and intermingling with others.

It is partially out of Merleau-Ponty’s view that, after distancing herself from the problems of social contract theory, Diprose creates her own unique position based on the archetype of the gift, stating: “If, however, we grant that identity and difference are produced through the giving of corporeality rather than before it then an altogether different picture of justice in the flesh emerges” (CG, 54). Consequently, in Diprose’s model, the distinction between self and other is neither original nor absolute. Everyone exists prior to being different from one another and, though each individual may develop

[^30]: In a very general sense I am referring to Hegemonic feminists who insist that women should refrain from marriage and motherhood because they view such things as catering to a patriarchal domination.

one’s own unique subjectivity, it is still within a joint inter-being context of shared 
existence.

To put it simply, the model of corporeal generosity implies that one is free to 
give anyone anything they want at any time and that acts of generosity should be valued 
and encouraged. Although risks are inevitably incurred, accepting anything else limits 
our individual freedom and possibilities. Furthermore, by presenting this matter 
corporeally, Diprose deviates from the notion of gifts as commodities and identifies that 
what we are in fact giving or sharing is not an object, but is in reality a portion of the 
self. As I will show in the following section, it is by viewing generosity in this way that 
Diprose is able to extrapolate the ambiguous relationship between human bodies to fit a 
model of intercorporeality among political bodies.

**Lies and Their Consequences**

In the arena of social justice, the colonization of Australia raises a number of 
philosophical issues. Specifically, the conflicts between European Australians and native 
Aborigines raise questions regarding the ethical concepts of truth, lying, and stealing. 
The imperialist settlers effectively stole the land from the indigenous Aboriginal people. 
Due to their limited and narrow worldview, the Europeans failed to recognize the 
existence of a culture that did not farm or build communities in the European manner. 
They refused to acknowledge the Aborigines and therefore believed that the land was 
free for the taking. This original untruth was referred to as *Terra Nullius* or “no one’s 
land.”
Despite the magnitude that this loss of physical property represents, it pales in comparison with the harm that has been wreaked on the Aboriginal culture itself. The colonization was not strictly a displacement of people, but also an attack on Aboriginal traditions and beliefs. Genevieve Lloyd recognizes a direct link between terra nullius and the continued domination of the Euro-Australian, describing the situation as:

…the second fiction, which both reinforces and feeds off the first: the idea of Aborigines as an inferior ‘doomed race,’ superceded by more highly developed, more enlightened Europeans. The two fictions are interconnected, both conceptually and in their legitimizing function: the idea that the land was owned by none, and the idea that what was already there was not a full human presence.  

Lloyd has touched on a very significant point here. That is, the colonizers not only refused to recognize their shared existence with the Aborigines; they in fact viewed them as inherently inferior. By perpetuating their lie of superiority, the Euro-Australians then continued to dominate the landscape in such a manner even through the 1960s, when they effectively stole Aboriginal children based on another misguided perception that they were helping to “civilize” these “primitive” people. Here I believe that, if not voiced openly at the time, there is definitely the air of doom that Lloyd is referring to. In fact, the Euro-Australians then further compounded their ethical wrongdoing by blatantly lying to Aborigines as they robbed them of both their future and of their links to the past. For example, the Aboriginal children were told that their parents would visit them. In reality, visiting was strongly discouraged and there were no guarantees that the children would ever see their parents again. This was just one among numerous other lies rendered for the purpose of maintaining order.

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This “Lost Generation” of the 1960s, as it is termed, is also utilized by Diprose to illustrate her notion of asymmetrical forgetting, and I believe she makes a valid argument. That is, while the contributions of the imperialists have been remembered and valorized, any gifts or generosity on the part of the Aborigines have been forgotten or ignored. As Galen Johnson deduces in a rather corporeal sense, “Forgetting is destructive. It steals upon us, and in this unwanted form, its fruits are ignorance, senility, paralysis, loss of speech, loss of presence.”

However, he also adds that a healthful forgetting also accompanies human occurrences. It is in this manner that forgetting harmed the Aborigines while the Euro-Australians were only made stronger by the very same act, as the Euro-Australians also benefited from forgetting any injustices resulting from their actions.

This leads me to discuss the possibility of decolonization in Australia. By “decolonization” I am referring to the Aboriginal rights movement, which has initiated a process of returning to the Aboriginal people what was once taken from them. This decolonization includes not only land but also their religious and cultural identity. I maintain that this effort is not simply a legal matter, and is one that has philosophical implications as well. It goes beyond the simple return of stolen property and speaks directly to the issue of repairing cultural injuries caused by unethical actions.

In a motion toward decolonization or “reconciliation,” the 1997 Australian government’s report *Bringing Them Home* recommends a process of truth-telling whereby the uncensored testimony of Aborigines whose children were taken away in the 1960s Stolen Generation atrocity is presented and recorded in the public forum. Here I

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concur with Diprose, who strongly supports this initiative. Her belief is that, through this course of “authentic listening” and in conjunction with an official state apology, reconciliation might begin to occur. These actions and their public acknowledgement are largely symbolic in nature. Drawing on Immanuel Levinas’ concept of “radical generosity” Diprose means to lead us to a new openness wherein we do not objectify other cultures as possessible and/or forever outside of ourselves. Rather, she is hoping that we may learn to borrow from one another in a mutually beneficial relationship free from domination, forced assimilation, and exploitation. “This generosity is born not so much with the combining of bodies whose capacities and powers agree but with the possibility of those dominant bodies remaining open to and transformed by alterity without effacing that indeterminate difference” (CG, 172). Generosity may only be accomplished if individuals leave the confines of their locked minds and make themselves open to new ideas and peoples.

However, while I support this direction of openness to others, I am not certain that generosity is possible in this specific case under the same corporeal model. My difficulty lies not in the claim that cultural bodies, being as they are all related through a common humanity, parallel the corporeality of physical bodies. This, I believe, is a reasonable projection. My concern is that the assessment of the relationship is mistaken. Although the original meeting of Europeans and Aborigines may have provided an opportunity to recognize each other as separate cultures still inextricably

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34 On Diprose’s appropriation of Levinas she writes, “It is necessary to acknowledge that I have just collapsed two dimensions of alterity that Levinas tends to keep apart in Totality and Infinity: the alterity of ethical relation, which I have argued disturbs my complacency and so inspires creative and critical thinking, and the alterity that welcomes rather than questions and is a precondition to recollection” (CG, 138).
linked by humanity, the passage of time has irrevocably altered the circumstances surrounding the situation. Consider how Diprose describes the corporeal ambiguity between two bodies. The Stolen Generation instance and the process of decolonization are used to illustrate her claim that, “generosity is most effective at the carnal level” (CG, 9). In my estimation she is viewing the situation as two bodies interacting as if they were engaged in a sexual relationship. In this interpretation of intercorporeality, the ambiguous cultural body finds it difficult to determine its own boundaries from the point where the other cultural body begins.

Nevertheless it appears to me that the Aborigines and the Europeans have, to a great degree, amalgamated into one Australian body. The Aboriginal culture has not been entirely eliminated, nor has it been completely assimilated. A more accurate description of present day Australia is as what Linnell Secomb terms a “fractured community.” Secomb argues that Australia is not a unified community, but is one that exists in, “productive disagreement… between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.”35 She maintains that the lack of unison among Australian peoples may be attributed to the resilience of many Aborigines as they resist both total annihilation and assimilation:

This myth of integration and unity suggests that the Aboriginal people have demanded recognition, and that slowly such recognition is being granted, and that as a result the Aboriginal people are becoming equal citizens of Australia. This rose-hued vision of compliance and integration distorts the complexity of Aboriginal resistance.36

At the same time, the Aborigines have not remained totally isolated. They too have become Australian citizens and participate in aspects of Euro-Australian culture.

36  Secomb 145.
This cultural multiplicity is evident in the work of Richard Reynolds and his research in the area of Aboriginal education wherein he claims, “What we currently have is a system where the Aboriginal child learns a second culture by ‘unconscious osmosis’… the learner begins to identify unconsciously with parts of Western culture.”\(^{37}\) Reynolds believes that this is not inherently problematic, provided that the Aboriginal children are given the opportunity to choose which cultural standards they wish to adopt.

When the Australian-Aboriginal situation is examined in this way, it is not simply difficult to determine where one body ends and the other begins, but impossible. They can neither be separated as entirely distinct bodies nor amalgamated as a unified whole. Therefore, an ethic of generosity must adequately understand these circumstances before attempting to advance social change.

### A Mutualist Model of Generosity

It is because of my interpretation of the Australian situation as a culture-within-a-culture that I do not recognize this state of affairs as a merging or engagement between two bodies. Rather I see it as a dominant culture swallowing a smaller, seemingly more vulnerable culture that continues to live and grow within and as part of the dominant body. Aborigines are now Aboriginal-Australians, living in an intimate, symbiotic relationship wherein two dissimilar organs contribute to the population (body) as a whole. It is a situation more indicative of an organic network than merely an ambiguous co-mingling of overlapping bodies.

Hence I wish to put forward a Mutualist model which recognizes that both groups have an affiliation of shared dependence with regard to the benefits and responsibilities of social and moral wellbeing. In this new model there is still a responsiveness to others, but through a shared commitment to authentic relationships, and a dedication to generosity above and beyond reciprocity, an understanding may be developed wherein the focus of the exchange becomes the symbolic. For example, by recognizing all parties as being situated within a network, a Mutualist model allows the Aboriginal Australians to be viewed as a hub within an interconnected system that is continuously changing. This is a forward-looking approach to improving matters as they are now, as opposed to a backward view of how to rectify past wrongs.

Generosity implies a supererogatory act of moral giving that is above and beyond an exchange for a proposed result. It supercedes the norms of simple giving. In meeting the demands of the Stolen Generation, any model of generosity must not only distance itself but should truly break away from the social contract theory that would merely keep the playing field level. Failing to do so might bring about improved social justice, but I believe it falls short of generosity.

To begin with, generosity is not the simple repayment of a debt even though one has unquestionably been accrued by the Australian government toward the Aboriginal subculture. By Diprose’s own account, injustices arise in part from commodifying the gift. As previously discussed, injustices arise in part from commodifying the gift. The van Boven principles outlined in the report entitled National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, endorse a plan for reconciliation based upon compensation and restitution as part of a plan for
rehabilitation. Diprose perceptively comments on the proposal’s inability to repay the lost, intangible element of time. “Still, if in retrospect we think that colonization is characterized by theft, then decolonization requires that something be given back if justice is to be realized” (CG, 148). Her observation sheds light onto the difficulty involved in rectifying this situation while still avoiding commodification. Such efforts are closer to attempting to reimburse a loss under the social contract that took advantage of the debtor, and are not departures from contractual obligations leading towards generosity. As Lester Hunt says, “If I were to take a bottle of wine next door to my neighbor, that would not be generous if, for instance, I borrowed one from him last week.”

I would also add that it surely would not be generous to repay a stolen bottle of wine in this way either. Hunt does suggest that there are rare exceptions to this when a repayment may possibly be viewed as generous if it vastly exceeds the debt incurred, “as would be the case if I borrowed a cheap wine and repay it with excellent wine. In general, action done in order to fulfill one’s obligations – to pay one’s bills, keep one’s promises, and live up to one’s contracts, for instance— are to that extent not generous acts.”

So with regard to most instances of reimbursement, it is difficult for generosity to restructure the perpetually unbalanced relationship of debtor and creditor. In the matter of the Stolen Generation, the loss of liberty, opportunity, and ethnic identity is so great that it may never be repayable in any real sense, let alone in a supererogatory fashion. This is not meant to suggest that we should forego attempts for social change. Rather, it is merely an acknowledgement that the debt owed to these people is so great that it could never be fully rectified or repaid in kind.

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39 Hunt 236.
As Diprose likens human bodies to social bodies, so too will I maintain that this applies to the Lost Generation. If the Australian government is in a symbiotic relationship with the survivors of the Lost Generation, then the government assumes a certain responsibility to them the way a parent takes on the responsibility of a child. Anything given by the parent-state is not perceived as satisfying a debt that can ever or should ever be repaid. It is doing the right thing, providing for the welfare of that being, attending to its specific needs, and not favoring one child/culture over another. A parental body could be generous to a child above and beyond basic needs through an open-ended generosity, but I am not convinced that in the case of the Stolen Generation their basic rights have been satisfactorily implemented. Therefore, when the government aids the Lost Generation it is of its very nature a reparation of past injustice done out of duty, not as an act of generosity. This is because the members of the Lost Generation are citizens who have a right to the same treatment and entitlements as every other culture in Australia.

Thus, a tension remains regarding the seeming impossibility of generosity in the specific case of the Lost Generation. However, I still maintain that a Mutualist model allows for the possibility of increasing social and political integrity by employing the principles of generosity, and I will discuss several strategies for making this a reality.

**Strategies for Generosity**

Diprose expresses that a key element of generosity is an openness, which she seems to characterize as a Levinasian, pre-reflexive receptivity to others. It is a willingness to give one’s self to others that attempts to override any individual interest.
Certainly this is a sturdy foundation for generosity, although perhaps it is best expressed with persons or cultures to which we have incurred no apparent debt. When I write that generosity is “seemingly impossible” for the Lost Generation, it is in the same way that Derrida writes of the impossibility of the gift. Generosity in this case is not entirely impossible. Yet it would take a tremendous amount of moral fortitude above and beyond the normal, a radical act that transforms how the parties see each other. That is, the entire power structure of Australia would have to be voluntarily readdressed. This is not to suggest a mere reversal in the current imbalance of power, as if the Aboriginal culture could now be the ruling body connected umbilically to a subordinate Euro-Australian culture. Aside from the political unlikelihood of this happening, it would be a change in dominance only and would ultimately not be a productive transformation. However, even if all past injustices may not be rectified, it is still possible to learn from these prior mistakes and prevent future abuses of power.

Furthermore, generous acts are only limited by impartial attitudes toward achieving justice. They are most feasible by becoming involved and aiding in situations wherein individuals may not be directly affected but, through recognizing the interconnectedness of human beings and by maintaining a commitment to openness, they realize the moral good of performing such actions. For example, cases of humanitarian aid to starving nations or political asylum for refugees would fall into this category. Yet by developing relationships which determine what these people really need as well as accepting their generosity or openness in return, all parties involved are able to benefit. It is the difference between establishing personal and direct contact with cultures in need as opposed to simply writing a check or providing a plot of land. By
assessing and addressing particular needs as well as accepting what these cultures may or may not offer in return, the gifts exchanged may be given without obligation and, therefore, resentment on both sides could be eliminated.

Perhaps an objection may be raised here that such openness to others is a risky behavior that should be avoided. However, I maintain that the element of risk is precisely what makes this openness central to generosity. As Joseph Kupfer states, “One danger…in all cases of generosity, is harming the self by overextending it for other people.”

Kupfer, following Hunt, believes that what people should strive for is a generosity of spirit, claiming:

> Generous-hearted individuals are big-hearted, able to enter into the psychology of other people. The ability to encompass other people’s travails or hopes, needs, or expectations, comes from an experience enlarged through identification with their lives. Largeness of emotional range often requires generous-mindedness to supply a corresponding largeness of view.

In this case, generosity rejects commodification of the act owed or a gift’s size. By being generous and not seeking specific consequences from one’s actions, individuals will in fact be rewarded by the enrichment provided by the relationship itself. These rewards resist commodification because they tend to be impermanent and noncompulsory.

Of course, this transformation of self, like all results stemming from the risk of openness, is hardly guaranteed. However good one’s intent may be, it does not absolve a person from unintended consequences, such as those incurred by a moral mistake which gives a foreseeable offense to the person we seek to benefit. Yet the new

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41 Kupfer 360.
possibilities gained certainly do have the potential to outweigh the dangers and our reservations.

A generosity of spirit may also apply to political or cultural bodies as well as individuals. Generosity, at times, will also involve sacrifice on the part of the giver. “While generosity *ought* to be pleasant,” Gary Shapiro claims in his examination of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “‘the impediment lies in the choosing,’ in our failure to find just the right thing and our hesitation, indecision, or anguish over that.” It may be as simple as the deliberation between giving away one bottle of wine from a well-stocked wine cellar versus giving away one’s last or most cherished, expensive bottle of wine. However, in true generosity of spirit, sacrifice or loss need not necessarily be viewed as a hardship. Giving away one’s best or last bottle of wine may actually be done with a light and happy heart for it attests to a lack of autonomous attachment and to an interrelatedness with others, an enjoyment of their enjoyment of something.

As stated earlier, however, generosity must avoid seeking any intended benefits to the giver. I would like to reiterate this point because it is especially important that individuals consider why they perform certain actions of perceived generosity. In the Stolen Generation illustration, the Australian government of the 1960s assumed that it was benefiting the Aboriginal children by removing them from their families. This later proved to be terribly poor judgment on the part of the government.

Such misguided moral perception is the reason that even some supporters of the recent reconciliation efforts in Australia wish to tread lightly in the midst of a process

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they nonetheless still encourage. Writing on Aboriginality and morality, Eve Darian-Smith states:

I want to try to unravel the political strategies that work behind these current ideologies and that have made it both possible and desirable for some people to express moral outrage and cross-cultural affinity. Attending land rights rallies, adopting Aboriginal literature, listening to Aboriginal concerts, and studying Aboriginal history suggest how people can get caught up in a bustle of moral excitement, without ever coming closer to the social injustices that motivated their initial reaction.43

Her fear is that even as well-intentioned Euro-Australians jump on the bandwagon of fighting Aboriginal oppression, they will be distracted by gestures and inadvertently continue to impose their own ethnocentric moral structures. Darian-Smith then concludes that, “Each person can choose his or her moral stance, but the choice is limited. The ‘state’, its administration, its power of social control, lives within the people who live within it.”44 For that reason, members of a majority group must be careful not to continue to dominate by omission, that is, by having good intentions while neglecting to recognize the core of the issue at hand. Generosity, like all moral virtues, may not be based simply on rationalizing behaviors. As Diprose calls for a practice of “authentic listening” to others, I believe it should be prefaced by the act of “authentic questioning” to determine what in actuality constitutes helping. This authentic questioning extends beyond one’s own definition of aid and instead involves asking others if in fact they do desire help and, if so, when and in what form should this assistance be attempted. In this way, the fears of intimacy that may trouble both parties can be bridged by the development of trusting relationships. Ideally then, the giver

44 Darian-Smith 59.
should investigate whether or not a gift is actually wanted before offering it. However, there is also a place for the unwanted gift, in that receivers may appreciate the symbolic gesture of a gift given with the intention of pleasing the receiver even if the actual gift falls short of this goal.

If our purpose is to be generous and not to expect any reciprocity, then the gift being delivered should also not affix any directives or, to put it another way, should be provided without “strings attached.” By providing a gift, individuals cannot assume that they have “bought” the right to determine the rightness or wrongness of its use. For instance, a gift must not be part of an assimilation process or be used as a tool to alter the values of another culture.

Richard Stith adds a compelling dimension to the consideration of generosity in its relation to fairness in his article, “Generosity: A Duty without a Right.” Using “the cookie example,” Stith exposes a philosophy of “mutual duty” that gets very close to the heart of generosity. When looking at the means by which we divide and share goods, the question of fairness rests on the final distribution; that is, the last article to be allotted between more than one person. This could be land, property, or any number of things. It becomes apparent to Stith that no one has a right to expect the last item of anything, nor should a person protest if anyone else consumes that item. Rather, the morally virtuous way to approach this situation is with straightforward generosity. While Stith admits that this runs the risk of wasting the final item, I believe this is not significant to the overall implication of his argument. The fundamental strategy for making sound ethical judgments with regards to generosity does not lie in determining

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45 My descriptive term for Stith’s lengthy example.
whom allegedly deserves something or why. On the contrary, it is a polite, thoughtful, and considerate manner of taking into account the interests of others first. This may then be applied in matters small or large. As Stith suggests, “There is no just allocation… There is no ‘right’ answer. There is only the possibility of possessing and the duty not to do so.”

Essentially, it all returns to the notion that a gift must be forgotten at the moment it is given lest the attached string damage the very possibility of mutuality the gift could otherwise foster. Yet I believe that it should also not be viewed as a theft, or as Diprose warns, remembered asymmetrically, thus forgetting in favor of the more powerful giver. Rather, I believe that gifting should be considered as an instant that, once it has passed, no longer has any significance whatsoever to the giver or to the receiver. I propose that the best way for this to occur is through the continuous practice of giving wherein generous acts become so common that one loses track of who gave what to whom. According to this moral ideal, each “body” recognizes itself as interconnected in a system of giving and receiving wherein gifts are always in motion.

Moreover, just as individuals should be generous givers and generous in their spirit of forgetting the tally, they should also be good receivers as well. This ought not to be translated as an acknowledgment of a debt to the giver, but is instead the honoring of an unofficial pact to keep giving to others. What never ends cannot be summed up under justice. By assuming a moral duty to practice the virtue of generosity, the end result will be a cohesive, interconnected network of openness, compassion, and justice.

The Virtue of Generosity

Generosity is a practice that directly relates to some of our most basic interactions with others. Rosalyn Diprose has claimed that it is a fundamental quality of humanity that associates humans with others even from their earliest days of life. My investigations have shown the positive aspects of Diprose’s corporeal generosity as well as its boundaries and limitations. Having put forward my own Mutualist view, I have re-addressed the question of how generosity can be modeled in relation to social progress. The generous acts of individual persons as well as that of governmental and cultural bodies are fundamental to the maintenance of virtue and the common good. Yet it also seems apparent that generosity is not always possible in situations where past injustices have been committed or under conditions where it might be contended that the association between bodies is such that generosity is not applicable. This is not, however, any reason to assume that past relations are permanently fixed. Evolving networks allow for an emergence of new and more authentic relationships, with a view toward the future free from at least some of the ties to the past.

The strategies outlined for my Mutualist model of generosity include: an openness to others, a willingness to become involved with bodies to whom we have no apparent relationship, the ability to accept risk in giving, and the acceptance that at times generosity may involve self-sacrifice. In addition, generosity should not intend to benefit the giver, should be a fundamental commitment to considering others first, and beyond the moment of giving, should be forgotten on the part of both the giver and the receiver. Finally, the best way to achieve a generous society is for both individuals and governments to recognize a commitment to giving wherein it happens so often and

Stith 213.
becomes so commonplace that it is essentially a cycle of continuous giving without a thought to reciprocity.
Chapter Three

Art and the Eternal Network

"Repelled by the slaughterhouses of the world war we turned to art. We searched for an elementary art that would save mankind from the furious madness of these times."

-- Jean Arp, Dadaist artist

The juncture at which art and society intersect has often been debated. It is not one that easily lends itself to specificity. “Networked art” has become an umbrella term used to encompass a wide variety of activities. I will touch on just a few of these. They include yet are not limited to: mail art, artist books and nontraditional publishing, artistamps, assemblings, experimental and visual poetry, video, performance, and e-mail art. The common denominator among these diverse media is not the manner in which they are produced, but in how they are presented to the world. Networked art is not only a phenomenon; it is also a philosophy. Emphasizing communication, what has been christened “the eternal network” is a movement not bound by temporal or topical considerations, that is instead united by a generosity of spirit with the desire to circumvent traditional systems of exchange, and enacted through an intimacy of expression.

The inception of networked art may stem back as far as the tin post cards of the Italian futurists or, by some accounts, even earlier to Vincent van Gogh’s postal exchanges with his brother Theo. Yet while these historical illustrations are interesting, it appears as though the groundwork for the networking aesthetic truly emanates from
Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp and the other Dadaists in the years 1916-1922. Their “anti-art” art set the stage for a revolution that forever changed how and why artists create. Susan Hapgood elucidates:

Appalled by the brutality of war, and by the complacent conservatism of the bourgeoisie, Dada artists found subversive, irreverent means to outrage their staid audiences, while at the same time overthrowing the artistic status quo.48

All of these things are standard fare for networking artists today. However, despite these similarities, as well as the often-collaborative nature of their projects and occasional use of the postal service as a method of delivery, there lacks in Dada a specific dedication to exchange. Therefore, although the ancestry of networked art may be traced to these figures, its actual nexus is better positioned with the artist Ray Johnson and the launch of the mail art network.

It is in this network of artists that I recognize the essential elements of a mutualist model of generosity. From its earliest roots as an interactive affiliation based mainly on artistic rapport, mail artists exercise a customary generosity that is as intimate as it is wide-reaching. While their exchanges are frequently tangible, the focus is not directed toward the art as an object or image so much as it is on the concept of a symbolic sending. While these artists do claim to experience a sense of personal benefit from what they receive as well as their own sending, they also greatly exceed the boundaries typically found in traditional, closed systems of exchange. Rather, the artists are part of a larger, more complex web of relationships whose work is circulating in a somewhat chaotic or random manner. They appear at times to understand that the rest of the world may not always be in step with their actions, and yet they continue on with the belief that their actions may affect a positive social change.
Given that, as I have previously mentioned, the mail art movement may be considered a pivotal stage in the development of the contemporary networked art of the twenty-first century, I believe it is appropriate to examine its history and development. At each stage, I will make note of the traits that are demonstrative of a mutualist model of generosity in practice.

**Ray Johnson and the New York Correspondence School**

While studying at the legendary Black Mountain school, Ray Johnson not only absorbed the foundations of his artistic techniques but also developed a lifelong attraction to Zen philosophy, particularly in regard to elements of chance. Yet his career as an artist did not formally commence until he relocated to Manhattan in the early 1950s. At that time he initiated the destruction of all of his previous works in order to begin again from a blank slate. Johnson had always had a penchant for writing clever, witty letters and post cards that he frequently illustrated for friends. He often included elements of collage in both his artwork and these personal missives. His growing dissatisfaction with the official art world, with its institutional hierarchies and gallery elitism, led him to seek new outlets for his artistic expression. In keeping with the nature of collage, he freely took images from popular culture and the art of others and then transformed them into a unique vision all his own. Johnson then employed the U.S. Postal Service as his primary means of distribution, starting with a small circle of artists and friends, and eventually branching out into a wide network that included hundreds of individuals from a variety of disciplines and locations. As a result, what came to be known as the New York Correspondence School, and then the New York

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Correspondance School (to indicate the dance-like relationship among partners) was born. 49

Johnson’s mailings, which were as prolific as they were creative, represent a fundamental move away from the paradigm of art produced to sell or own. This was art to give, send, and potentially lose or destroy by the very process of mailing. In this regard, there was always an element of chance or risk involved in the process. However, Johnson was not only generous with his own works; he also elicited generosity from others by first sending them a work and then urging them to "add and send to" someone else. In this way, an unknown artist in Ohio might be instructed to add something to his work and then forward it to a known artist or public figure. This process also worked in reverse, but the main goal was to triangulate a connection between these otherwise unconnected individuals. Johnson created a symbolic exchange, yet at the same time overrode the urge to keep and covet. Longtime correspondent, friend and archivist, author William S. Wilson describes being forced to accept the transient nature of Johnson’s art in spite of an initial reaction, commonly elicited in those who received it, to retain and preserve the works for themselves or others:

With the loss of the original I, or we, gained an implication: Conserve this! Restore this! What are the consequences of trying to resist perishing? When I declined to mail that beautiful object, planning to wait for a curator to visit, Ray mailed another film-still in an envelope with loose sand, some of which was irretrievably lost even as I opened the envelope. So I mailed both envelopes to London, exposing them to experiences very like the course of ordinary life, a course that can be hurtful if resisted, yet can become radiant if it is assented to. Ray thought of mail-art as more like fireworks than precious objects in a sanctuary of art. And if his mail-art evaporated or disappeared, its vanishing made a gap that could call forth newer mail-art, fitting seamlessly into a later event. He didn't keep fresh eggs around until they were old. 50

49 The term “New York Correspondence School” was actually coined by the artist Ed Plunket, who was an early and active participant in the emerging network.

From its nascent days as an underground movement, mail art has become an aesthetic that knows no global boundaries and has seemingly limitless manifestations. There are as many variations on what constitutes mail art and correspondence or collaborative activities as there are participating artists. Hence, again, why “networked art” has become the definition *du jour* to encompass them all. Yet the basic philosophies of mail art remain. For example, there is a very simple credo that “senders receive.” This is not to be confused with sending an article for the sole purpose of getting something in return. Quite the contrary, most active mail artists send so much and so often that they can scarcely keep account of what went where and to whom. Nonetheless, in a more general sense, there is an almost karmic element to this art, which ensures that those who give of themselves will be found by others of like mind. In a sense, and with homage to Johnson, everyone becomes a “fan” of everyone else, making connections without hesitation and responding in turn.

While on the surface these activities could be mistaken for egoism, I argue that just the opposite is true. A great deal of networked art is sent with only minimal identification of the sender. The work is frequently collaborative in nature, with no specific reference to who contributed any particular element to the totality of the piece. In addition, a fair number of networked artists can and do become well-known and respected critically, yet they are still willing to distribute artwork that could otherwise garner high prices on the open market. As Ladislav Guderna, Martin Guderna, and Ed Varney convey, what these artists seem to value is the connection or communication involved over the property exchanged:

Mail art continues to be an important and vital communication medium… because it is so necessary. Within a seemingly humble exterior, mail art embodies the
actual realization of global communication and cooperation on a person to person basis. Mail art is a concrete example of the spirit of mutual understanding thru communication which is the foundation of the dream of global peace and prosperity.\textsuperscript{51}

While these authors describe networked art in unusually idealistic terms, they do capture the principal intentions associated with a movement that is focussed on the notion of communication and not on self-promotion.

### Networked Art in Relation to Culture

The motivation behind these ingenuous exchanges varies by artist, but a common thread that appears to unite many of them is an artistic alienation from society at large. Art networkers often regard the human condition in light of what they view as a Kafkaesque bureaucracy in contemporary life. Yet instead of turning away from these systems, they embrace their mechanisms and use them as subversive tools to subtly “throw a wrench into the system.” Addressing mail art’s relationship with the culture at large, Craig J. Saper remarks:

> Rather than dismissing modern culture in favor of a transcendent escape from the society of spectacles, red-tape tangles, or even mass-marketed religions, the artists involved in intimate bureaucracies have reconfigured quintessential forms of our often bureaucratized lives to provide new interpretations of contemporary future cultures.\textsuperscript{52}

I agree not only with Saper’s allegations but also with many of the examples he later cites as evidence of using the tools and trademarks of “the system” to usurp the system itself. Rubberstamps have become a means of both democratizing art by making it


accessible to everyone while at the same time allowing some individual artists to produce works on the scale of a small assembly line. Artistamps, or faux postage, use the medium of the mail to express a message in a manner other than the ordinary, humdrum, plain envelope and stamp. On certain occasions, artists even create their own “countries” or “principalities” from which these stamps are issued. Anarchist tendencies are certainly in evidence, but the motivations behind these acts point toward a desire to foster human interaction in areas where it seems to be absent. Instead of opting out of a societal system they disagree with, they instead “opt-in” with the creation of a new entity in line with their values and codes. Still another form of expression can be seen with the TTPO, which stands for either “test” or “tease” the post office. Falling into this category would be any number of three-dimensional objects ranging from a mundane household item to an extravagant sculpture, always mailed *sans* container. Frequently, it is not the object being mailed that is considered “art;” rather, it is the act of mailing it. This is a recurring theme that is also advocated by many artists sending envelopes and cards. In effect, with the TTPO, the minor disruption of an official government agency such as the post office is turned into a slyly subversive act. It is generally only a small *glitch* in the system but it may be viewed as significant because, again, a third party is (somewhat unwittingly) drawn into participation. That is, the postal worker becomes part of the performance, which is not complete until delivery is made to its intended recipient.

Once again, I would like to call attention to networked art’s affinity with Dada in that both of these have specific, philosophic goals aimed toward undermining the current cultural norms of the day. Considering the eternal network’s passionate dedication to
analyzing, archiving, and writing about itself, both Dada and networked art might be considered movements by manifesto. However, if we are to make this parallel, then we must also open networked art up to the same criticisms faced by Dada. First and foremost, Dadaism is all too frequently dismissed as merely an art era not worthy of philosophical considerations. Yet often when it is given a philosophical glance, it fairs no better. Simone de Beauvoir is just one commentator on Dada, but she sums up numerous common objections with her discussion of what she interprets as an incoherent, continuous negation of itself, by itself. Of Dada and its smaller, psychoanalytic offshoot Surrealism she warns of suicide, deterioration of mind and body by drugs, and that:

Others succeeded in a sort of moral suicide; by dint of depopulating the world around them, they found themselves in a desert, with themselves reduced to the level of the sub-man; they no longer try to flee, they are fleeing.53

However, I assert that Dada, though it is purported to be a philosophy of nihilism is actually much closer to extolling de Beauvoir’s own belief in freedom than she realizes.

The extreme measures endorsed by Dada must always be considered against a backdrop of the First World War with all of its carnage and disillusionment. Dada calls for an end to all culture, all art and aesthetics, as well as all values and morals. Yet at the same time it does so within the context of culture, art, and, at least in the sense of reacting to and then rejecting them, morals. A Duchampian readymade may make a mockery of high art, but it is presented as art just the same. Yet there is also a cheeky insolence and mischievous joie de vivre underlying the participants’ actions, such as leaving much to chance elements and placing an emphasis on games, that betrays their

claims of total negativity. It seems as if, out of their anguish, there essentially arises a new creativity. This creativity is a dynamic rejection of the confines of society and is, in sum, a freedom. That is why I believe that Dada, although accused of attempting to overthrow culture, was acting instead in a Nietzschean sense by attempting to overcome culture. Thus, Dada is a paradox unconcerned with being a paradox, and herein lies its liberating force.

It is this force that networking artists are tapping into today. However, they are still asked to justify their actions to a contemporary culture that is every bit as eager to dismiss the endeavors of networked artists as they were those of the Dadaists. After all, what interest do art magazines and journals have in lending credence to a movement that takes pride in thumbing its nose at the art establishment? When media coverage is given, very often the emphasis is not placed on the aesthetic qualities or ethical implications of art exchanged freely. On the contrary, networking’s philosophy is often turned against it. For example, another common mail art principle is that all art received for a mail art call will not be subject to a jury, will be displayed without censorship, and for their contributions the artists will be provided with documentation that is, at the very least, a list of participants and their contact addresses. Documentation creates an opportunity for future networking among individuals. Yet the generous and egalitarian nature of these principles is generally not praised, but is often chastised as being without monetary value, open to works of questionable quality, and nothing more than an aberration from or imitation of “real” art. Meanwhile, an untold story pertains to how many established and revered artists have secret or lesser-known mail art pasts, that these artifacts are often situated within exhibitions associated with other movements
(such as Conceptualism, Neo-Dada, and Fluxus), and how often these items are hoarded by collectors. Nonetheless, as is characteristic of networked art, the press is hardly shunned by artists and is seen as another opportunity to infiltrate the bureaucracy at large. During periods when the mainstream press does not come calling, small, independent publishers do the work in their place, bringing networked art to a larger audience and lending it critical legitimacy.

buZ blurr is an artist who has weathered many storms and public censures of networked art in his over thirty years of involvement with it. Nonetheless he has never backed down from a critic, and has only reinforced the tenacity of how deep the philosophical convictions run among mail art devotees. If any artist could be held up as means to refute an inherent nihilism, then blurr would be exemplary. His work is tirelessly devoted to capturing the human spirit and then sending it on into the world. In addition to his postal activities, buZ blurr is a master of railroad graffiti. Yet what is graffiti if it is not an act of destruction, a blight on the landscape of public and private property?

Following in the tradition of the hobos and the railroad workers of the 1930s and forties, blurr’s elegantly lined portraits are the antithesis of desecration. His sparse style is clearly recognizable as his own, and his prolific portraits are often accompanied by a few words or phrases that imbue the works with a poetic dimension. Still, when the engine leaves the boxcars follow, and away go blurr’s artworks, “mailed” just like envelopes on their way to parts unknown. Many are never heard from again, while some find there way back to him years after their creation. Often the images are altered

54 Of the three movements cited, Fluxus is the least likely to protest this association since numerous Fluxus artists have crossed in and out of networking activities over the years. By many mail artists, Fluxus is
by rust, which he welcomes as a silent partner in his process. Of his graffiti work blurr comments:

The main appeal of the railcar icon is its anonymous nature, whereby observers can project their own fill-in scenarios to an unknown author’s work. It is freely given but in a Dada Absurd way, the language somewhat an aggressive challenge on the train of thought.\(^{55}\)

Much attention and recognition is now being paid to buZ blurr, particularly on account of his stenciled portraits which emerged from photographs taken for his Caustic Jelly Post mailings. Yet his philosophy remains unchanged, and in what he has dubbed Surrealville, Arkansas, he continues to make art as he always has and life carries on as (un)usual.

**The Risks of Intimacy in a Public Arena**

With as much consideration as I have devoted to the public dimension of networked art, I believe it is also important to comment on the interior aspects that accompany it. In Saper’s aforementioned discussion of artists in relation to bureaucracies, he employs the term “intimate bureaucracy”.\(^{56}\) However, Saper is far from being alone in associating intimacy with networked art. It would be incorrect to assume that because of the wide range of exchange involved in these art activities that somehow intimacy or any substantial relationship with others is absent from the process. In actuality, just the opposite is true and this is what sustains the network. Sharla Sava examines this claim with reference to Ray Johnson:

To casually situate Johnson into the cool professionalism of the art world, however, is to misunderstand the intimacy of his mail art network. ‘I don’t just

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slap things in envelopes. Everything I make is for the person I’m writing to.’ Johnson’s act of ongoing self-distribution was never indifferent to its recipient.57

Sava properly stresses the importance of interpersonal relationships among mail artists. This is what separates the art of communication from the empty promise of the chain letter. Underneath the elaborate sets of codes, puns, references, jokes, and even occasional jabs, lies a true commitment to receiving and responding to the transmissions of others. Many of these works become intensely personal, but at the same time they are given without strings. That is, they are sent through the mail with the understanding that, even if the work does arrive, the recipient may in fact just send it on to someone else. Recipients are often just as likely to alter an artwork or even go so far as to cut it up and recycle the elements as they are to retain any of the pieces in their possession. Even those who do actively archive the works they receive are eventually faced with the problem of diminishing space, and the pieces are often boxed up and either sold or donated to a third party such as museums or other collectors.

On the notion of selling, there is a mantra among mail art adherents that “mail art and money don’t mix.”58 This aphorism is superceded by the one rule under which all others fall: that there are no rules. That is, the selling of networked art does occur on occasion. It is for this reason that networked artists must not only accept the psychological risks associated with intimacy, but also be generous enough to let go of any personal connection to their work. Even the artists themselves come and go, for

58 This is an oft-repeated maxim in the mail art world that is commonly attributed to the artist Lon Spiegelman.
only the network is deemed “eternal” and unending by those who contribute to its web of interconnectivity.

It is not my intention to draw a strict dichotomy between the public and private aspects of networked art. The two are very much linked together. Nor am I claiming that the building of intimate artistic relationships is of a private nature and precludes participation in social awareness or issues of justice. Quite the contrary, I propose that intimacy and generosity actually encourage interaction in these arenas.

The Politics of Networked Art

Clemente Padin is a living illustration of how a mutualist model of generosity, as may be observed in networked art, can in fact influence changes in the political spectrum. A respected visual poet, artist, and activist, Padin was committed to protesting the horrific injustices perpetrated by the Uruguayan government beginning in the late 1970s. The atrocities committed at that time include the oppression, coercion, and torture that is so often associated with dictatorial regimes. In spite of this, the fascist administration still had the powerful financial and military backing of the United States government. Padin resisted the repressive forces by publishing booklets and staging art events. Anonymously, he also mailed post cards adorned with artistamps that brought attention to the plight of his people to recipients all over the world. When his protesting efforts were exposed, Padin was arrested and sentenced to four years in prison. After serving two years and three months of his imprisonment, he was released through the aid of an American senator. Yet he attributes his liberation to his “friends” in the mail art network, who were tirelessly dedicated to sending art and messages on his behalf.
Without the campaign of mail artists, who first needed to spread the word amongst themselves and then to the political powers that be, Padin believes he never would have been freed from prison at such an early date.\(^{59}\)

Padin is not the only political prisoner to have been affected by mail art. Prior to the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and East Germany, numerous artists risked their lives and their livelihoods to exchange mail art from behind the iron curtain. Even if networkers are not faced with the Dadaist reality of a world war, they are acutely aware that there is always a war somewhere and are rarely content to sit idly by. Instead they create an intimate fellowship of artists and writers, and attempt to reach underdeveloped and oppressed nations where even the postal system may be a luxury that few can afford. Padin, for his part, is still extremely active in the network, fighting for peace and justice at all times. Of his history he modestly states:

My small drama is insignificant to the suffering of thousands and thousands of Uruguayans but I just can’t understand why there are still people who ask me why I make a political issue out of art…\(^{60}\)

While the art works of Padin, Mark and Mel Corroto (a/k/a FaGaGaGa), and others are almost explicitly political, many networked artists’ work is significantly less politically motivated. Some consciously avoid political statements, while still others participate in the network simply for personal enjoyment. Yet the general tone of the network remains overwhelmingly nonjudgmental and generous regardless of artistic purpose. Within the Eternal Network there seems to be room for and admiration of any number of approaches.

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\(^{60}\) Padin, 18.
Networked Art Enters the Twenty-first Century

Primarily, networked art encompasses a wide range of dialogic, artistic encounters. It relies on an ethic of symbolic exchange, rooted in generosity and sustained through intimacy. Perhaps even the official bureaucracies that these artists are so fond of tweaking may be showing signs of changing under its spell. More “established” art institutions are admitting to an appreciation for mail art and exhibitions are becoming more commonplace. In addition, the government of Argentina now recognizes a sanctioned Mail Art Day, and in May of 2003 the Belgium government issued a mail art postage stamp designed by Guy Bleus that is, at long last, officially legal for use as postage. A press release from the Centre of Attention in London announces a call for artists to participate in its digital World Wide Web log or “blog,” describing their organization as:

A network of operatives covering the globe. The show aligns and deploys art world practitioners using the power of digital technology to survey the art scenes from across the world. Surveillance enables us at the Centre to provide an alternative version of events and to challenge the hegemony of those who persist in setting our agenda.  

It appears as though the digital age, far from hindering networking activities, is actually enhancing the possibilities for artists attempting to break new ground in their work while establishing or maintaining communication with other artists with the same goals.

Networked art may be viewed as the first response team of the avant-garde, and even as history begins catching up to where networked art has been, artists are already moving into the future. Although it has not yet overtaken society at large, networked art continues to do its part in creating its own society with its own idiosyncratic, volatile,

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and ultimately liberating philosophical convictions. It is a thriving and complex network whose commitment to symbolic exchange allows individuals to function as hubs within a larger web that dynamically alters itself to meet its own needs. It is not merely reactive, but proactive, as it employs a mutualist dedication to generosity that benefits both the sender and the receiver, without assigning obligations on either end. Furthermore, although the work is often highly intimate, it is nonetheless sent off into the network as a forgotten gift that may or may not be displayed publicly, archived or lost, kept or sent on by its receiver, or ever heard from again. It is a risk that these artists are willing to take based upon a philosophy that always favors creation and giving over possession and commerce.
Conclusion

Ethics and Aesthetics

Although ethics and aesthetics need not necessarily be considered in relation to each other, there are instances where art can provide valuable insights into moral assessments, motivations, and actions. Contemporary art has the ability to serve as both a window into society as well as a harbinger of where society is, or should, be directed in its ethical approaches. Iris Murdoch professes that the connection between art and ethics is central to moral perception, and she views art as something core to the nature of understanding human relationships.

Art then is not a diversion or a side-issue, it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen. Art gives a clear sense to many ideas which seem more puzzling when we meet with them elsewhere.\(^{62}\)

By embracing art as an essential element of her philosophical thinking, Murdoch is able to take a step toward re-humanizing what she views as an unfortunate loss of sentiment in the prevailing moral theories of the twentieth century. Her call for an ethics of “loving attention” is an early move away from Impartialism in its suggestion that such virtues as compassion for a stranger or care for friends and family is neither personal or impersonal. Hence Murdoch’s Particularism is neither Partialist nor Impartialist, opening up the possibility for a new dimension of morality and of moral consciousness.

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Impartialism and Partialism Revisited

Murdoch’s philosophy of loving attention challenges the legitimacy of what she identifies as a prevailing omnipresence of Impartialist theories. Blum compares and contrasts Murdochian particularity with later theories of moral Particularism presented by Williams, Nagel and Scheffler.⁶³ These thinkers, while each holding different positions, summarily put forward two main claims. First, they argue that the domain in which Impartiality and its impersonal approach to ethics to establish sovereignty is riddled with limitations. Thus, it is proper for social and political relations to challenge the pervasiveness of Impartialism instead of continuing to look to its tenets for approval. Secondly, they assert that there is a domain of personal life, legitimate unto itself, wherein reasons for moral action do not depend upon one’s relation to an objective, impartial perspective.

Nonetheless, while the respective approaches of Williams, Nagel, and Scheffler all serve to question the domination of Impartialism on ethical thought, it is important not to confuse their claims with Murdoch’s. Blum believes that the key distinction to be made stems from Murdoch’s consideration of care:

Nowhere in Nagel, Scheffler, and Williams is articulated the Murdochian moral task of caring for or attending to particular individuals—a task that is...a matter of neither personal good nor detached objectivity.⁶⁴

Only Murdoch specifically addresses a broader sense of universal human virtues and duties, such as commitments to fundamental human goods such as friendship or familial relationships.

⁶⁴ Blum 16.
Care-giving and other more complex relationships raise ethical questions that cannot be tackled simply through the theories of a detached, removed Impartialism. Whereas extreme Impartialists believe that there is a right reason to do something regardless of who will be affected, Partialists assert that there are ethical reasons to support non-objectivity when situations involve people with whom we have relationships. Partialism takes into account that responding to one person’s particular need for care may not be applicable to all persons everywhere, but that such responses may still hold moral worth. My own model of generosity takes a moderate Particularist position by asserting a general commitment to generosity without attempting to prescribe a universal means of application to every possible situation. Simply stated, one should be generous but also have the freedom to exercise generosity in the best ways one sees fit. This is not even remotely close to another extreme, ethical relativism, which views ethical decision making as if each and every action must be considered singularly without regard to others in the past or future. Rather, what my model of generosity does do is take relationships into account as contributing factors to ethical assessments. Whereas an extreme Partialist might be subject to the criticisms of relativism, a mutualist position based on moral particularity asserts that Impartialist considerations may factor into moral decision making, but that they do not fully include all of the indispensable elements of morality.

Through an examination of networked art, I have illustrated that art and ethics not only can mix, but also in fact do merge at times. As Lon Spiegelman once wrote, “Mail art is to the art world what the Olympics are to sports, with the substitution of
The driving aesthetic of networked art is its ethic of generosity; the conceptual exchanges between artists markedly eclipse the media actually or physically being exchanged. This is by no means an indictment of the quality of work, but rather attests to the munificence involved in freely sending art out into the world. Networked art shows that gifts may be given and forgotten and that every gift need not be considered as implying a reciprocal obligation. Yet, concurrently, there is a higher dedication to generosity in a general sense, implying that one should be continuously giving of one’s art, time, self, etc., as a matter of course or practice.

To state that one should have a dedication to generosity may at times seem similar to the Impartialist theories that are subject to criticism, and could perhaps be viewed as a potential objection. However, at the same time, it should be noted that the goals of Impartialist approaches to ethics such as Rawls’ contractarianism have not been disparaged. What is being argued against is the impossibility of their achieving a utopian equality mainly because of what I perceive to be contractarianism’s principal difficulty, the insistence on a detached, impersonal approach to moral decision making. We may look to Murdochian ethics here in that, like Murdoch, a Mutualist model of generosity never asserts a preference for personal good over the notion of doing what is morally right. What it does suggest is that how we perceive and come to consider what is morally right is based upon relationships. Again, this is not ethical relativism, but it is particularism. Generic definitions of good and right do not take specific moral virtues, such as generosity, kindness, or care into serious consideration. When it comes to

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evaluating the moral consequence of deeds, supererogatory concepts such as these transcend simple description. For this reason they are often simply ignored by Impartialist theories and in particular those that are heavily focused on advancing rationality. Generosity, compassion, and kindness are not always rational and at times may even seem irrational. Perhaps the real answer here is that it depends on what allegedly accounts for their irrationality. Regardless, this is not necessarily a reason to dismiss them from ethical consideration.

**Relationships and Ethical Mutualism**

The significance that building relationships holds for ethical theory can be evidenced in the network culture that is developing in the digital information age. This age presents both opportunities for building dynamic relationships as well as the potential to stratify our society into even more isolated groups. Networked art, as a microcosm within society, has shown us that the former option is at least possible. In this regard, intimacy is to be revered and not feared, repressed, or eliminated because it allows us to interact with other persons and groups on an authentic level.

By looking at earlier societies such as those with a dedication to the potlatch, we may recognize how giving as symbolic exchange has deep roots in the history of human relations. I have also shown how Rosalyn Diprose makes an excellent case for appreciating the natural interconnectedness among persons. Even at a simple, corporeal level, there is no one who is not connected to some other body at some point in life. With the aid of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, Diprose arrives at the conclusion
that generosity is one of the most basic virtues and that it is, whether exercised by
dividual or political bodies, fundamental to ethical interaction with others.

My Mutualist approach, like Diprose’s, also relies upon generosity and
responsiveness in others. Yet instead of viewing the relationships of persons or groups
as ambiguously overlapping, I place their interconnectedness in the context of a
network. There is always a shared commitment because of a shared dependence. The
shared dependence of network culture eliminates the reliance upon unequal, back-and-
forth exchanges between asymmetrically advantaged groups, and allows for the
continuous reorganization of society. A dedication to generosity benefits the network as
a whole while simultaneously building relationships of understanding. Future-oriented,
it no longer focuses on who owes what to whom or whose gifts were previously
forgotten and instead allows for adaptation and the emergence of new relationships.
This is best accomplished through an openness to others regardless of whether or not we
have a pre-existing relationship with them.

In order to achieve its high level of openness to others, a Mutualist generosity is
prefaced by an acceptance of a certain level of risk. There are simply no guarantees that
a generous party will always benefit in a given situation. A *modus vivendi* that values an
aesthetic of generosity is quite different from one that values and seeks exactitude or the
elimination of risk. However, by accepting the risks involved in generosity, it becomes
possible to develop a vibrant network whose overall rewards have a potential to greatly
outweigh the individual risks.
Works Cited


