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# THE LOGIC OF GIVING IN HUMAN MOTIVATIONS

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## The Logic of Giving in Human Motivations

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Moderator: *The questions we would like to address now are: Could we identify a kind of rationale which would lead us to understand better disinterested giving? What specific elements articulate such a logic?*

Thank you for your kind presentation. First I would like to thank RCC for making it possible to hold this activity, and to Harvard Center for Ethics and Bentley University for supporting this discussion.

A similar question was posed to me by a sophomore last year while I was at Bentley University in postdoctoral research. I have remembered it quite well, as she has made me think a lot about the convenience of providing a reasonable answer.

We were waiting for the bus, so it was not difficult to start a conversation. As you guess, my condition as a foreigner focused the dialogue. At one point, she asked me: “What are you researching?” That question was unavoidable and the answer easy. I told her I was studying the logic of giving. “Oh, that is interesting. And what is the logic of giving?” Briefly I explained to her that it means giving to someone without an expectation of getting anything in return. She kept silent for a moment, looked at me very curiously and smiled. Then, she asked me: “Do you really *believe* that it can be possible?”

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It seemed to me that she was relegating this behavior to the realm of fantasy, as if it was not *reasonable*. Far from disappointing me, this conversation stimulated my curiosity much more to delineate this logic.

The problem is not solely misunderstanding *gift-giving*. It is true that it could be interpreted as imposing an implicit debt to be demanded in the future. However, our experience confirms a genuine gift is never a transaction. In my opinion, the real problem is that, if we miss a proper interpretation of such giving, we will miss other human realities which follow the same logic. This is the case, for instance, in trust building. If we want to build trust as if we were buying it, we could get a broad range of responses, but it would be very difficult (in fact, impossible) to form a relationship based on genuine trust.

One of the ideas we owe to Aristotle is the clarification of a good life. He states that: “Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods”.

I am sure we will agree with Aristotle if we have experienced the loss of a very close friend. He or she is *irreplaceable*. Artists reflect this void very accurately. This is the case of Spanish poet Miguel Hernández who wrote an elegy after his friend Ramón Sijé’s death. The poem is open with three lines:

In Orihuela, his town and mine, death has taken from me,  
as if struck by lightning, Ramón Sijé,  
with whom I loved so much.

Hernández was a goat shepherd and became a great poet with the help of Sijé. They both shared the passion for poetry and Hernández was well aware how his friend had helped him to flourish his literary talent.

The last line (“with whom I loved so much”) reflects the *core* of friendship: to share lovable goods. This is the same idea Aristotle points out as being authentic friendship. He distinguishes things that are desired because they are useful for obtaining other goods, and things that are desired because they are good in themselves. The first kind of goods builds friendship insofar as we need those friends instrumentally, the latter builds genuine friendship.

In the case of useful goods, we can assign them a *price*. They have an exchange value. But if we try to get *any kind* of goods as if we were buying and selling, even those which Aristotle identifies as good in themselves, then we face a real danger. Michael Sandel has recently pointed out that this process ends in a corruption of those valuable goods. Even more, this market process *does affect* us also. Oscar Wilde wrote that the cynic is “a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing”.

There are goods which are valuable in themselves. They cannot be bought, as in a shop, because they are *priceless*. In fact, this kind of goods has to always be *received unconditionally*. Thus, giving them to our friends or to anyone reflects our **benevolence**: we want to contribute to the good of the other. Grasping the reality of benevolence helps us to transcend *instrumental reason*.

Up to this point, we are trapped between instrumental reason and moral reason. Is disinterested giving an appearance for a posterior transaction? Or does it respond to a duty which compels us to give? Or is it something more?

I think this problem reflects what Chesterton missed most in the public debate. He held we are fond of talking about many social and moral issues just “to avoid discussing what is good”. This is a decisive point for benevolence. Without a sense of the good it is impossible to develop coherent giving: we would confuse it with self-interest or with righteousness.

The discussion about the good is a very broad topic in which I will just track a fruitful clue. It is provided by one of Dostoevski’s characters who holds that “beauty will save the world”.

Experience of beauty can happen walking in a garden or contemplating nightfall, or listening to Mozart. When it happens, we are shaken by a kind of *joyful resonance*. This particular joy does not come from satisfied interests or biological needs. Beauty is always *received*. It can be neither predicted nor claimed. It is a gift, a joyful gift.

This joy opens a path to better understand what is good. In fact, good and beauty are intertwined: the same interior predisposition to *enjoy* beauty is required to *discover* the good. Through beauty it is possible to enjoy the goodness of the good.

The joyful experience of receiving the good empowers us to give the best of ourselves, *even* if it is not reciprocated, *even* to anyone. We will behave in this way only if we *acknowledge gratefully* all the good *we have received unconditionally*. We do not give in order to receive, but we give *because* we have received.

These main ideas compound what Chesterton named the **grammar of gratitude**. If we learn this grammar we will read in a more profound way our own reality and, even more, we will better write not only our own future story but also we will contribute to the story of those who are close to us. In addition to instrumental reason and moral reason, we should also cultivate *grateful reason*.

The character who states that “beauty will save the world” has an unusual ability: he knows people’s interiors better than themselves. This capacity leads him to sincere compassion for the suffering of others, even to the point of self-sacrifice. The paradox Dostoievsky underlines is that he is considered an *idiot* by the rest of the characters.

In MBA schools, managers receive exhaustive training in order to be more efficient. But if we consider organizations as groups of singular and unique persons, who are able to give disinterestedly, maybe what organizations need most is that *managers become a little more idiotic*.

Thank you very much.