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## On the moral perils of exchange<sup>1</sup>

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Anthropologists – as indeed their informants – often stress that gift exchange and commodity exchange are premised on fundamentally opposed principles. In Gregory's neat formulation, for example, gift exchange is seen (following Mauss) as presupposing the interdependence of the parties to the exchange and the inalienability of the gift; while commodity exchange is seen (following Marx) as presupposing the reciprocal independence of the transactors and the alienability of the commodity (Gregory 1982).

This radical contrast between the principles which underlie the two types of exchange is commonly reported as being associated with an equally radical contrast in their moral evaluation. A particularly striking example is provided by Taussig's discussion (1980) of the folklore of the Christianised Black peasantry of the Cauca valley in Columbia. Some peasants who work as wage-labourers on the big sugar plantations are supposed to enter into a pact with the devil by which they increase their production and earn a better wage; but this can only be spent on consumer goods and luxuries, for such money is barren and cannot be productively invested – though some say that it can be made over to friends who can use it for productive ends. Even the cane fields cut by one who has contracted with the devil are rendered infertile. For this reason it is believed that devil contracts are made only by male wage-labourers. Peasants working their own plots would not be prepared to lay waste their land by such a deal, while the value women place on fertility and the nurture of children also relieves them of the temptation to make terms with the devil. The man who does succumb is destined for a painful and premature end.

Taussig interprets all this as saying that capitalist relations of production are regarded by his informants as the work of the devil. They are an inherent evil, productive of death and barrenness. This privileged insight is possible because their victims still have one foot in a traditional

economy based on household production for use and on the reciprocal exchange of gifts between households. While in the mature capitalist economy market relations appear as part of the natural and unquestionable order of things, in Cauca the new economy is represented as neither natural nor good, for it can be questioned from the standpoint of the premises underlying a different economic order.

Beliefs about the baptism of banknotes reveal similar moral doubts about the new regime. At the time of baptism an unscrupulous godparent conceals a peso note in his or her hand, and it is the banknote rather than the child which is baptised. The first effect is that the child will be condemned to eternal purgatory when he or she dies; the second is that the godparent is effortlessly enriched at the expense of others, for the banknote endlessly returns to its sponsor with increment. This, then, provides the indigenous explanation of how capital accumulates, of how money 'breeds' money. But unlike the developed form of commodity fetishism where this process is regarded as being as natural – in Marx's image – as pears growing on pear trees, it is here revealed as something which can only occur with the aid of supernatural forces, and which involves a corruption of the most sacred social relationships.

Broadly similar symbolic constructions are hinted at elsewhere in the ethnographic record: in, for example, the Bakweri witchcraft belief that those who grow rich through market exchange do so by turning their kinsmen into zombies who toil for them on a distant mountain, beneath which, perhaps not fortuitously, is a spirit market from whence new monies enter the human world. When Frenchmen needed zombie labour to construct a deep-sea harbour, money was left lying around the Bakweri villages to entice them to the waterside (Ardener 1970). Here – as in Cauca – commodity relations appear to be a domain of dark and dangerous supernatural forces and a moral peril for those who must engage in them; and in the Cauca case at any rate such perceptions are rooted in a conviction of the moral righteousness of their antithesis, the world of use-values and gift exchange. Gift exchange is safe and good; commodity exchange is threatening and bad.

Much of this chapter concerns an ethnographic context in which the moral evaluations of exchange are so different that they might at first sight appear to be a straightforward inversion of the attitudes of the Cauca peasantry. Here it is, *par excellence*, gifts which embody evil and danger, and it is the money derived from such gifts which is barren, good only for a prodigal and futile consumption and productive only of death and damnation. By contrast, commercial profits and market transactions are generally seen in a much more benevolent light. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that this picture must be qualified, for neither gift exchange nor commodity exchange constitute morally

homogeneous and undifferentiated categories. A dire moral peril attaches only to certain kinds of gifts, while a limited range of commercial exchanges become the focus of a very similar symbolic elaboration. My first objective, then, is to try to specify the kinds of exchange in which a moral peril resides, and the kinds of exchange from which it is largely absent. The second is to begin to explore some of the factors which might account for these disparate moral evaluations.

### The poison of the gift

The context referred to is the sacred north Indian pilgrimage city of Benares.<sup>2</sup> Many hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims visit Benares each year and, of these, a substantial proportion come with the aim of performing some part of the rites associated with the dead – the cremation of the corpse, the immersion of the cremated ashes in the Ganges, the pacification and transformation of the malevolent ghosts of the unincorporated dead (*preta*), or the ritual offerings to the incorporated ancestors (*pitars*). Others are there to attain some immediate boon, or to expiate some specific sin (like cow-slaughter). The vast majority, however, come simply for the generalised merit of the pilgrimage. A large number of priestly Brahmans cater to the moral and material needs of the pilgrims: specialist ritual technicians known as *karam khandis*, hereditary pilgrimage priests (*tiratha-purohitis/Pandas*), temple priests (also *Pandas*), Funeral Priests (Mahabrahmans) and so on. As a class these specialists have a not altogether undeserved reputation for a grasping rapacity and an utter ruthlessness in the extortion of gifts from the pilgrims. Though there are no comparable figures for the present day, Bayly (1983: 126) reports that at the beginning of the nineteenth century there were more than 40,000 Brahmans in the city living off religious gifts, that is between 17 and 20 per cent of the total population.

Such gifts rate as *dana*, and – notwithstanding the reputation of the priesthood – the ideology of *dana* is that of the 'pure gift'. It is a voluntary and disinterested donation made without ostentation or expectation of any kind of *this-worldly* return, whether material or immaterial. Not even the most trivial reciprocity can be accepted without detracting from its merit. Even the desire for *other-worldly* rewards is regarded with equivoque, so that paradoxically the full quotient of merit is held to redound only to the donor who gives without thought for his spiritual harvest. The merit acquired, in spite as it were of the ideal donor's disinterest, is proportionate to his or her means – the widow's mite being in theory the equal of the jewel-encrusted treasures of the prince.

In most, though not all, contexts the appropriate recipient of *dana* is a

person of superior status; paradigmatically it is a Brahman. Every rite of passage – as well as many other rituals presided over by a Brahman priest – should be accompanied by a *dana*, without which the whole performance would be completely worthless. But in north India wife-taking affines – *par excellence* the husbands of one's daughter and sister – are also the regular recipients of *dana*, which is consistent with the fact that in this hypergamous milieu they too are persons of superior status. Along with her dowry a girl is transferred in marriage as *kanya dana* (the gift of a virgin), and throughout the marriage this asymmetry persists with the *dana* flowing unilaterally from wife-givers to wife-receivers. Gifts to priests and gifts to affines – these then are the preeminent examples of *dana*. I shall consider them in turn.

Despite their proverbial cupidity, or perhaps because of it, the priests talk obsessively about the moral peril which their receipt of *dana* entails. Now it is true that some kinds of *dana* are worse than others; especially virulent, for example, are the gifts given to rid oneself of evil planetary influences, or those offered in the name of the malevolent ghost (*preta*) before its transformation into a benevolent ancestor (*pitara*) at the mortuary rites conducted on the twelfth day after death. But all *dana* is dangerous and all priests are compromised by its acceptance. 'There is no such thing as good *dana*,' they say. 'It is all vile (*nikrist*); whoever takes it burns his hand.'

From this point of view it is quite irrelevant whether the gift is in cash or kind. *Dana* is often given in monetary form, though nearly every cash payment is an explicit surrogate for goods of one kind or another – a cow, a bed, or a set of clothes, for example. Generally, such a payment represents only a fraction of the purchase price of the object for which it stands: Rs 5 for 'the gift of a cow' (*gau-dana*) when a real cow would cost many times that amount. Specially affluent and fastidious pilgrims and mourners tend, however, to regard it as more seemly and appropriate to donate the specified items rather than their cash equivalent. These are either bought in the shops or supplied out of the priest's own stocks; that is, he will 'sell' his cow (or whatever) to the pilgrim and then receive it back in *dana*. Though the fact that the same cow may have been gifted to the same priest several hundred times over is commonly the occasion for caustic comment on the spirit of the times, the priests themselves welcome this arrangement; and in general *they* prefer cash to kind since the goods they receive are generally surplus to requirements, of poor quality and difficult to dispose of at a reasonable price. Indeed the homes of some of the larger *Pandas* have the musty air of delapidated warehouses for substandard beds, cooking utensils, umbrellas and other household paraphernalia.

The essential point here, however, is that from a moral point of view

there is nothing to choose between gifts in cash and kind.<sup>3</sup> In whichever form, the gift embodies evil and represents a peril, and the reason for this is that it is held to embody and transmit the sins of the donor to the priestly recipient, who is likened to a sewer through which the moral filth of his patrons is passed. In an ideal world, it is true, he would be able to 'digest' the *dana* and evacuate the sin by dint of an extraordinary ritual fastidiousness involving the daily repetition of *mantras* and the performance of elaborate rituals of expiation, and, above all, by giving away *with increment* all that he has taken in *dana*. In the real world, however, all this is regarded as a sheer impossibility. Quite apart from the inexorable fact that they can afford to give away little of what they receive if they are to live, most priests will frankly admit that they are ignorant of the correct ritual procedures, and would have neither the time nor the resources to get through them all even if they were not. As a result they see themselves as endlessly accumulating sin. The sewer becomes a cess-pit.

The consequences of accepting *dana* that cannot be 'digested' are that the priest contracts leprosy and rots; he dies a premature and terrible death vomiting excrement, and then faces the torments of hell. His children inherit the sins, and with them an evil disposition; and his descent line dies out in two or three generations. The priest's intellect is enfeebled, his body gets blacker and blacker and his countenance loses its 'lustre' with every gift received.

'Look,' said my friend Pahalvan Pande (a corpulent ex-champion wrestler and now a prosperous wholesaler of coal),

look at my boy Bhima. See how healthy and strong he is, for he has eaten grains which are pure and bought with the money of hard work [*mehnat*]. My elder brother [a priest] was once just as good-looking and even stronger than I. But now that ill-begotten money has turned his face as black as the coal I sell, and you see how thin he is. Yet every day he is performing *rudrabhishek* and *gayatri jap* [in expiation]. 'What, [he rhetorically concluded,] 'of those who do not [do even that]?'

The only gloss that it is necessary to add is that the priestly elder brother is generally regarded as the most knowledgeable and ritually fastidious member of their community, and that from the point of view of its commercial ethics the coal trade is as notoriously grubby as its product. Yet hardly anybody I think – least of all his elder brother – would radically dissent from the contrast Pahalvan was drawing between the spiritual dangers of their two occupations.

I say 'spiritual dangers', but more accurately they are both physical and spiritual. The sin emerges as excrement vomited at death; it causes the body to rot with leprosy, seeps into the hair (which is why it is

necessary to be tonsured on many ritual occasions), and on death it makes the corpse particularly incombustible. When the corpse of the Chief Minister of Bihar was brought to the main cremation *ghat* in March 1983, it burnt only with the greatest difficulty despite the size of the pyre and the liberality of the *ghee* and resin applied to it – all on account, said my friends, of the enormous burden of sin accumulated with his corrupt earnings. Sin, then, is a bio-moral phenomenon which manifests itself in quite tangible and material ways. It is something which can be transferred from one person to another. It is 'in the money' offered in *dana*. You can give it and take it. The real difficulty is in eliminating it, this giving rise to what Shulman (1985) has neatly characterised as the 'hot potato' view of Indian social dynamics. The most obvious thing to do is to pass it on.

Nor are the dangers entirely on the recipient's side. *Dana* may only be given to a Brahman of unimpeachable character, for – in theory at least (that is, priestly theory) – the donor becomes responsible for the sins committed with the money he gives even though he cannot possibly know of the recipient's evil intentions or proclivities. 'A Brahmana,' warns Manu (IV: 190), 'who neither performs austerities nor studies the Veda, yet delights in accepting gifts, sinks with *the* (donor into hell) . . . ' It is as if from a moral point of view the donor and recipient are metamorphosed by the gift into Siamese twins.

This notion that the donor shares responsibility for any misuse of his gift should give him pause for thought, for it is almost in the nature of such money that it is misused. I have, for example, heard priests say – in tones which suggest that it could hardly be otherwise – that all the money taken in *dana* by the big Benares Pilgrimage Priests is rapidly disbursed in fees to lawyers, doctors or prostitutes. But what is universally proclaimed is that the money is never of lasting benefit. Were the ideal theory actually followed it would remain forever in high velocity circulation resting nowhere long enough to represent investment capital. But even though this ideal is totally subverted, the money can never be put to productive use. 'There is no abundance in it (*barakat nehin hoti*),' they say. 'It does not bear fruit (*phalta nehin*),' it is never fructified (*phalibhut*). Nor can it be hoarded, for when it is put by it is eaten by white ants. It comes and goes, flowing through the priest's hands like some foul liquid. One day he is so poor he eats his food off stones; the next he receives a munificent *dana* and lights his hearth with new cloth. 'The money is like that' they say – speaking as though it squandered itself.

It is true that in reality a few priestly families have managed to use the offerings made by their pilgrims to establish successful commercial enterprises of a secular kind. But for every new business that succeeds, scores fail – thus 'proving' the theory that the money itself is barren.

There is, however, an important asymmetry here. While the profits from *dana* cannot be productively utilised in commerce, it would seem that commercial profit can be transmuted into *dana* and thereby increased. People often talk as though the business ventures of a magnanimous merchant who unstintingly gives to worthy Brahmans are sure to be rewarded with success on account of the merit he accrues. Though for the wrong reasons they may well be right, for studies of Indian traders in general and of Benares merchants in particular (Bayly 1983), suggest that a reputation for piety is a hard commercial asset essential for establishing a merchant's credit-worthiness. 'One story has the great merchant prince Kashmiri Mull [a Khatri from Benares] visiting his rival, the austere and orthodox Manohar Das, as the latter mucks out his cow-sheds. "Watch out for your shoes" cries Kashmiri Mull; "Watch out for your accounts", responds the other, implying a relationship between piety, frugality and mercantile success' (ibid. p. 379).

'Money', said the Emperor Vespasian apropos his tax on public latrines, 'has no smell' – even though it is 'made from urine.' Benares people, by contrast, often talk as though the money transacted in *dana* is tainted. Does it, then, retain this taint when it is exchanged for commodities, and can it – like the proceeds of Tausseg's devil contract – be utilised by others for productive investment if it is passed on to them in a different transactional mode?

Some of my evidence would suggest that such money does indeed retain the odour of sin when it enters into a different transactional sphere – as it certainly keeps its character when it is passed on to others as *dana*. I have, for example, heard it said that the businesses of those who have taken an interest-free loan from a priestly friend or kinsman never prosper until the money is repaid; and that a clerk who accepts 'the money of expiation' from a priest as a sweetener for some bureaucratic favour courts misfortune and illness. But this is not to say that the shopkeeper from whom the priest buys provisions is likely to have any qualms about the transaction, or to give a second thought to the origins of his profit. Looked at from the priest's point of view, though, the provisions which he has purchased with such money are certainly contaminated. It is as if the sin which inheres in the gift is transferred to the commodity for which it is exchanged. As I interpret the evidence, then, the basic notion is that it is only in those cases where the exchange is a unilateral one without proper reciprocity that the money of *dana* transmits its taint when transacted in a different mode. But when a balance is struck, as in the case of the shop-keeper, the sin can safely be assumed to remain with the priest.

What I hope to have conveyed, then, is a sense of the moral peril which the priests experience in relation to the offerings on which their live-

elihood depends. Such a livelihood is continually denigrated by the priests themselves as dependent on a combination of callous extortion and obsequious sycophancy (*ji hazuri*), and – in opposition to money earned by the honest sweat of one's brow (*khare pasina ki kamai*) – as constituting an unearned income. Though in fact the amount of effort devoted to eliciting *dana* may be quite considerable, in ideological terms *dana* is a gift and not a remuneration for priestly services, which are rewarded, as we shall see, by a separate emolument known as *daksina*. However hard the actual work by which *dana* is obtained, the money of *dana* is not 'the money of hard work'. In many cases, moreover, the intended recipient of the gifts they appropriate is a god, a ghost or an ancestor (for whom the priest stands in), and there is therefore a sense in which they can be seen as living parasitically off offerings to others (see Derrett 1966) – and sometimes distinctly dubious others to boot.

It is not therefore surprising that those who can afford to, often renounce their hereditary calling and repeatedly cite the demeaning nature of *dana* as their reason for doing so.<sup>4</sup> Now the interesting thing about such individuals is that they appear to have few misgivings about going in for trade. It is not money or the material world that they claim to renounce – few become ascetics. It is the proceeds of *dana*.<sup>5</sup> On his death-bed the medieval merchant of Cologne instanced by Tawney (1972: 49–50) directs his sons to pursue a less spiritually perilous occupation than trade, and one can well imagine him recommending the priesthood. In similar circumstances the Benares priest cautions his sons against the priesthood, and one can well imagine him recommending trade.

That which is taken in *dana* must – as we have seen – be given away in *dana*, thus implying the generalised exchange of sin within the priesthood. But this injurious circulation cannot remain confined within purely priestly circles, for the wife-taking affines of priestly families are the most important recipients of their donations and they are by no means always priests themselves. Even the affinal prestations of non-priestly families (irrespective of caste) are somewhat problematic for – although such gifts have not been subject to the same snow-ball effect – they too are imbued with the sins of the immediate donors. 'In "the gift of a virgin" there is also sin and expiation' my informants would say when I asked whether the axiom that all *dana* is dangerous applies even to marriage. Gifts to priests and gifts to affines are again equated in the general complaint that nowadays the groom's people tend to be quite as ruthless and importunate in their dowry demands on the bride's family as priests are in their dealings with pilgrims. This intrinsically equivocal nature of the marriage gift re-emerges, I suggest, in the ideas of the lower castes about spirit possession.

*Bhuta-pretā* are the spirits of people who have died a 'bad death' (the results of bad *karma*), or whose mortuary rites have been inadequately performed. Either way, they are the product of sin. Such spirits cause a whole range of misfortunes; but amongst the several symptoms which are likely to be listed in any given case, one of those most persistently cited is that although the family earns well, the money – like the money of *dana* – just seems to melt invisibly away. *Bhuta-pretā* are most likely to molest members of their own family and lineage; but are also said to travel between affinally related households in the same direction as women and gifts (cf. Planalp 1956: 643). That is, they go from wife-givers to wife-receivers. By contrast, ghosts never *spontaneously* go 'against the grain' by transferring themselves to wife-giving affines.<sup>6</sup> In a number of the cases I recorded the spirits had moved across more than one link in the chain of affinity. That is, they had originally belonged, not to the afflicted household's immediate wife-givers, but to *their* wife-givers – to the affines of affines. As women and gifts flow asymmetrically from lineage A to lineage B to lineage C, so the *bhuta-pretā* follow the same path, possessing as they go not only the girl with whom they came but also any other vulnerable member of her husband's household. But why should this be so? My informants say that the *bhuta-pretā* 'follow the money'. They 'remain attached to it' and therefore 'come on top of it'.

What I am suggesting, then, is that such predominantly low-caste notions about the likely behaviour of malevolent ghosts reveal an underlying fear that the gifts given in marriage entail very much the same kinds of consequences as the gifts made to the priest. Both rate as *dana*, both should be purely unilateral transactions, and both are saturated with the evil consequences of the donor's conduct, or of the conduct of those closest to him. The sin is 'in the money' donated to the priest; and the unsatisfied spirits whose sad fate is a consequence of their sins 'follow the money' donated in marriage. For both kinds of recipient the result is suffering and misfortune, though both can hope to pass the problem on down the line to their own recipients. Consistent with all this, the belief that the money donated to the priest is barren and cannot be used for productive purposes is paralleled by the idea that the money given in marriage may be accompanied by a ghost, who ensures that that money will never yield sufficiency and that the family fortunes of its recipient will never prosper. I conclude therefore that whether we have to do with prestations to priests, or prestations to affines, the oriented gift of *dana* is seen as highly problematic and as containing evil and dangerous mystical influences.

Now I must immediately concede that it might be argued that my picture of both is altogether too bleak. It is, for example, undeniable that in certain contexts a bride is also represented as Lakṣmi – the goddess of

wealth – who brings prosperity, fertility and increase to her husband's line. By the same token, it is also true that gifts to priests are commonly represented as positively productive of merit (*puṇya*). That not all *dana* is seen as an expiation (*prayiscitta*) of sin and evil would also seem to be suggested by the fact that the occasional informant will distinguish between 'bad *dana*' (*kudana*) which is given 'with desire' (*sakama*) in order to atone for a sin, counteract a malign planetary influence or win a boon from a deity, and which was likened to a bribe (*ghus*); and 'good *dana*' (*sudana*) which is given to 'worthy vessel' (*supatra*) 'without desire' (*nishkama*) for any specific reciprocation. In full measure at least, merit can only be the fruit of the latter.

With regard to 'the gift of a virgin' I do not of course deny this conflicting, more comforting and better known side of the picture; but it is nevertheless clear that in many contexts the most salient feature of affinal prestations is that they are threatening and hazardous in a way which invites direct comparison with the gift to the priest. This is consistent with the fact that the bride herself is stereotypically represented as the source of division and conflict within the joint family into which she has married; while the gifts which accompany her are patently the source of incessant wrangling and bitter recrimination. As for gifts to the priesthood, we need to distinguish between the ideal theory and people's perceptions of practice. If 'good *dana*' is given without desire to a perfect donee then in the degenerate conditions of the *Kali Yuga* – our present world epoch – there is no such thing, as there are no wholly disinterested donors and (more importantly) no really worthy recipients. The latter would be the accomplished Brahman ritualist who is learned in the Veda and who gives away more in *dana* than he receives, or – failing that – the one who resolutely refuses to take *dana* at all. The reality, then, is that the only 'vessels' who are actually available to accept *dana* are by definition more or less unworthy to receive it (*kupatra*). Ergo all *dana* is more or less bad.

I must also concede that not all transactions which anthropologists would conventionally gloss as 'gifts' rate as *dana*; and that other types of gift do not constitute a comparable moral peril. Unlike *dana*, most such gifts are governed by an explicit ethic of reciprocity. If, for example, I go to somebody's house taking fruit or sweets for the children, or if I give my wrist-watch to a friend who admires it, then that is *bhenti* not *dana* and is part of the regular 'give and take' that exists between us. The *bhikṣha* (or *bhikh*) given in alms to an ascetic (or beggar), and the *chanda* donated towards the upkeep of a monastery, represent exceptions to this rule of reciprocity; but neither of them is said to contain the sins of the donor or place him in jeopardy if the recipient of his charity misuses his gift for sinful purposes.

This clear-cut contrast between the poisonous nature of *dana* and the essentially benign character of other gifts is blurred only by the somewhat ambiguous category of *daksina*. Sometimes *daksina* is described as a supplement to *dana*, a gift added to the *dana* to make up for any deficiencies in it. So, for example, if I donate a cow to a Brahman, then I must add a small sum of money to my gift to top it off. This *daksina* 'consecrates' (*pratishta karna*) the *dana*, which without it 'bears no fruit'. At other times, however, informants use the term to refer to a fee paid to a Brahman priest for his ritual services. When, for example, a well-to-do patron employs a specialist *karam khandi* to perform a particular ritual which his hereditary household or pilgrimage priest is incompetent to conduct, the *karam khandi* receives *daksina* as a fee for performing the ritual; but the *dana* (which is significantly greater in value) is given to the hereditary priest who sat idly by throughout the ritual. What complicates the matter, however, is that in such a case the *dana* which goes to the latter is also accompanied by a (nominal) *daksina*; and it would clearly be possible to interpret this either as a gift which supplements the *dana*, or as a 'fee' for the ritual labour involved in accepting it. This essentially ambiguous nature of *daksina* – as 'gift' or 'fee' – is reflected in my informants' equivocation over whether or not it embodies the dangers of *dana*. Many stories suggest that it does, though equally often this is denied.

Leaving the difficult case of *daksina* aside, it is clear that it is in *dana* – and not in other kinds of gift – that a dire moral peril resides. Why, then, should this be so?

One view of the problem here would be to see it in terms of the ambiguous position of the priest in relation to a Brahmanical ideal moulded by the values of asceticism. The ideal Brahman should as nearly as possible approximate his life-style and behaviour to that of the world-renouncer, but the problem with *dana* is that the priest's acceptance of it irremediably compromises this ideal of ascetic autonomy and inextricably enmeshes him in the material and social order. It is the Brahman's ascetic transcendence of the world which qualifies him as a 'worthy vessel' for the gifts of the pious; but the paradox is that his receipt of such gifts inevitably endangers this very transcendence. Following Heesterman (1971), I have argued elsewhere that this is a crucial aspect of the difficulty (Parry 1980). But if for no other reason than that its focus on the perspective of the priesthood fails to shed much light on the similarly problematic nature of the *dana* offered to affines, it seems clear that it is far from being the whole story.

Another way of approaching the problem might be to focus on the fact that *dana* embodies something of the bio-moral substance of the donor – something nasty at that – in a way and to an extent that other forms of gift

do not. This is consistent with its ideological roots in sacrifice. *Dana* is explicitly said to be a surrogate for sacrifice appropriate to our degenerate epoch (cf. Manu I: 86; Biardeau 1976: 27). Just as the victim stands for the person of the sacrificer, so the gift stands for the donor. An extreme case of this identification is *tula dana*, where the donor is weighted against some valuable commodity which is thus equated with his 'gross body' (and is consequently said to contain his blood, marrow, and excrement), and which is then gifted in *dana*. But whether the gift contains the blood and excrement of the donor, or merely his 'sins', it is clear that its acceptance entails incorporating into the self the inferior essences of others. In an hierarchical world, such a transfer is bound to be problematic and even subversive of the hierarchy itself. If people of different strata are beings of different species, the gift becomes a kind of miscegenation. It is hardly surprising, then, that it assumes the form of a moral peril.

This notion that the gift transmits, and is therefore capable of removing, sin, not only tends to subvert its own ethic of disinterested generosity, but also presupposes that ritual – and indeed financial – reparation can be made for moral transgressions. Such attempts to dispose of ethical burdens by ritualistic means are a central preoccupation of Hindu religiosity; though the idea that this can be done does not go unchallenged in the tradition at large. Certainly the ethic of intention completely repudiates any notion that atonement for sin can be simply purchased. It might, then, be possible to interpret these beliefs about the mystical dangers of *dana* as part of the inevitable backlash against offering ritual solutions to moral problems, and as expressing a deep unease that this is an ultimately futile and fraudulent endeavour. When the gift is transformed into a purchase price for salvation – as it inevitably is – this endeavour becomes all the more problematic. Danger lies in the moral deception in which both of the parties to the exchange collude, and it is this which explains what is in a comparative perspective the most striking feature of the ideology: that here the gift is liable to demean the donor as well as the recipient.

It might further be argued that what gives this problem a special poignancy in the Benares context is that the sanctity of the city largely derives from the belief that all who die – or, according to some, all who are cremated – within its precincts automatically attain salvation or liberation from the cycle of rebirths (*moksa* or *mukti*). Now clearly the priesthood has a considerable interest in upholding this dogma on which the religious preeminence of the city – and hence their own livelihood – is founded. But equally clearly this same notion places the significance of their sacerdotal function in question, for the rituals at which the Brahman officiates become an irrelevance to the salvation prospects of

many of their patrons. For those who have had the good fortune to die or be cremated in Benares, the conduct of the mortuary rituals and ancestral offerings is a mere formality quite irrelevant to the fate of their souls; for all who confidently anticipate such a death, the whole gamut of priestly rituals are arguably deprived of this ultimate significance (cf. Parry 1981). Moreover, the ideology of *bhakti* – which has exercised a profound influence on modern Hinduism and according to which devotion to a personal god is sufficient for salvation – reduces the Brahman to a similar irrelevance.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in the all-important matter of one's ultimate destiny, the mediating function of the priest is subverted from two different directions at once, and by ideas to which the priests themselves will more or less readily assent. It is not altogether surprising, then, that they should have a somewhat uneasy conscience about their earnings from an occupation which a part of their own belief system declares redundant.

What is, I believe, the most problematic aspect of *dana* concerns, however, the fact that it is an unreciprocated gift. Certainly the priests themselves commonly attribute their degradation and relative inferiority to other Brahmans to their (exaggerated) view of themselves as purely unilateral receivers of gifts. Amongst the six conventionally enumerated duties of the Brahman is to receive and give *dana*. Direct reciprocity (even as we have seen in the form of the *quid pro quo* of priestly services) is, of course, entirely contrary to the whole spirit of *dana*. But so too is the notion that the immediate recipient is the final terminus of the gift – which must at all costs be passed on to another worthy recipient. The root of the problem, however, is that in the real world the professional priest is constrained to retain most of what he receives – and the greater the disproportion between receipts and disbursements the greater the burden of accumulated sin. It is the money and goods which are siphoned out of the flow of exchange by being retained which are really barren, and which infect the family fortunes with their evil sterility. 'When you give seventeen annas having taken sixteen, then that is auspicious (*shubha*). From this no shortage will result. But if you do not give (in this way), then there will always be a continual decline (*hamesha ghatta rahega*).'

Now it is true that it might be argued that the gift is in fact reciprocated by the liberation from sin which the donor receives in *direct exchange* for his material prestations. But on the one hand the ideology denies that the gift made out of such interested motives is a 'true' gift at all; while on the other it is widely held that the Brahmans of today – or at least those who are prepared to soil their hands with *dana* – are so fallen and unworthy that, far from releasing the donor from sin, he is more probably dragged down into hell by the bonds which the gift creates between them. In

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short, the profligate priesthood cannot deliver on its side of the bargain and the gift is therefore unreciprocated.

It is also true that the *bhiksha* offered in alms to an ascetic is an unreciprocated gift, but in no way entails the kind of moral difficulties associated with *dana*. The crucial point here, I suggest, is that such prestations are given to the *renouncer*, with whom no relationship is possible since he is outside the social world. What is threatening about *dana* is that it is donated to people who have at least one foot within a social order founded on reciprocity, but from whom no return is received. The man-in-the-world belongs within a conceptual order in which all are both givers and receivers, all castes perform their allotted function on behalf of the collectivity and nobody gets anything for nothing. The mystical dangers of *dana* express the uncomfortable recognition that there are some who do.

But, of course, the whole theory insists that *dana* must be given without expectation of any immediate return, or any form of *quid pro quo* from the recipient. Insofar as a reciprocity is entailed this is effected through the impersonal mechanism of *karma* and consists of 'unseen fruits' (*adrstaphala*) to be plucked in another existence. The theory, as Trautmann (1981: 279) puts it, is a 'soteriology, not a sociology of reciprocity . . .'. Yet the social world in which men actually live is inescapably founded on what Gouldner (1960) called the 'moral norm of reciprocity'. There is therefore an inherent tension – even a contradiction – between a soteriology which denies reciprocity and a social order which is premised on it. This tension, I suggest, finds eloquent expression in the moral ambiguity of the gift itself – the soteriological orientation of which repudiates the moral basis of society.

### The innocence of commerce

I turn now to the other side of my original dichotomy, to the realm of market exchange.<sup>8</sup> Here we may start by noting that the traders of Benares are celebrated for their eagle-eye for quick profits and their dubious commercial practices. They are widely supposed to use the most sophisticated techniques of adulteration; are credited with a magician's ability to pass off substandard goods and a wily canniness in manipulating the bureaucracy for licences and permits; and are commonly charged with creating artificial shortages to drive up prices. As much, and no doubt more, would be said of the businessmen of any Indian city. Yet the remarkable thing is that although everybody would agree that such practices are morally reprehensible, their condemnation generally seems to lack a real sense of outrage.

This is not, of course, to imply that the merchant is always liked or

trusted. 'If you meet a snake and a Marwari (trader)', says the proverb, 'kill the Marwari.' But the rapacity of the merchant is somehow part of his *jai-dharma*, of the code of conduct which is an aspect of his nature, and one might as well get morally indignant over the propensity of scorpions to sting. Certainly nothing I have ever heard would suggest that trade is regarded as *intrinsically* bad, or that traders see themselves as confronted by the kind of moral peril which is so strongly internalised by the priests. Nor is a sense of such peril conveyed by the literature on Indian traders; and I can think of no ethnographic or historical evidence for a conception of trade remotely comparable to that of the philosopher-theologians of medieval Europe whose attitude to commerce was – as Tawney (1972: 47) put it – 'that of one who holds a wolf by the ears'.

Again, in Hinduism it is by no means easy to find parallels for such Biblical notions as the love of money being 'the root of all evil', or as camels having an easier time getting through needles' eyes than rich men getting to heaven. Incarnations of the gods do not roam about chasing money-lenders out of the temples, and not even 'the most vile of merchants' sells the Son of God for thirty pieces of silver. In a positively encyclopedic work on the origins of evil in Hindu mythology, O'Flaherty (1976) shows how Hindu thought has elaborated almost every conceivable explanation for suffering and evil. Yet by comparison with our own cultural heritage the striking thing is that the book contains hardly a mention of money and avarice. Indeed the whole thrust of the most characteristically Indian solution to the problem of theodicy – the doctrine of *karma* – is that the rich deserve and have earned their good fortune.

Nor do I find much to suggest that money is regarded as an inherently dangerous and polluting medium. It is not, as in the margins of gothic manuscripts, represented as filthy and disgusting waste defecated by demons and apes (Little 1978: 34). Far from being an outsider to society, as was the Jew in medieval Christendom, the financier tends rather to be a paragon of religious orthopraxy. Priestly rights are bought and sold with complete equanimity, and there is no Hindu equivalent of the deep unease of the Christian Church over simony. Unlike the medieval friar or the Buddhist monk, the Hindu ascetic has few qualms about handling money, and both temples and monasteries have often been engaged in large-scale trade and money-lending (Cohn 1964; Spencer 1968; Mines 1985: 26, 42). What Hindu St Francis would ever require a disciple who accepted a coin in offering to take it between his teeth and deposit it in a dung-heap? It is, of course, true that for the renouncer *any* infatuation with the world is reprehensible, but money is not singled out for special obloquy, or made to act as a condensed symbol for all such attachments.

Nor, despite often extremely high rates of interest, has money-lending

ever been condemned by Hindu thought with any of the vehemence of Aristotle or St Bernard. Manu (X: 115–16) lists lending at interest among the ten acquisitions of wealth consistent with *dharma*; and as among the ten means by which a distressed Brahman may legitimately maintain himself. If it, of course, possible to find texts which deprecate its practice (Kane 1973: 3: 417–18), but what is for the most part discountenanced is merely an excessive rate of interest (*ibid.* p. 419–21). Certainly nothing suggests the severity with which medieval thought judged usury (as equivalent to sodomy in its opposition to natural increase), or the usurer who was to be refused communion, absolution or burial in consecrated ground (Tawney 1972: 48; Little 1978: 211). On the contrary, he is often seen as a public benefactor (Dubois 1906: 656; Darling 1925: 201–2; Parry 1979: 323); money-lending on a small scale is widely practised by well-to-do members of all respectable castes, and I know priestly families who regularly lend at interest without hinting at any of the moral doubts they so commonly voice over *dana*. In the past even the Maharajas of Benares acted as money-lenders (Bayly 1983: 373–4). In terms of the ethical evaluation of finance and trade, then, it might seem that 'the spirit of capitalism' had fewer obstacles to surmount in India than it did in Europe, where even Calvin dealt with usury 'as an apothecarie doth with poison' (Tawney 1972: 144).

This is not, of course, to imply that all commercial transactions are equally unproblematic. Such fragmentary information as came my way on the topic of bribery, for example, would suggest that although those who demand bribes commonly represent them as a legitimate perquisite of office (employing such euphemisms as *daksina* or *haq*, meaning 'right'), the *excessively* rapacious official is seen as liable to much the same fate as the priest who lives off *dana*. It was on account of his corrupt earnings that the Chief Minister's corpse refused to burn – and I could cite a number of other examples which convey the same message.

The most striking exception to the moral neutrality of commercial profits, however, concerns the profits derived from death. The wood merchant's proceeds from the wood he sells on the cremation ground, the takings of the shopkeeper who specialises in shrouds and other mortuary paraphernalia, the fees of the burning-ground barber and of the exorcist who deals with the spirits of the malevolent dead, all carry much the same taint as *dana* and entail similar consequences. 'The money of cremation ground', people say, 'will never allow anybody to prosper.'

Because of such money one wood-seller's family was decimated within a generation, while their wife-taking affines fell to murdering each other over the dowry provided out of the profits of the sale of wood for the pyres. A young man I knew well, whose family owns one of the shops



which specialises in the goods used for cremation, has a similar story to tell. Most of the time he himself works as one of the city's numerous commission agents (*daldals*) or 'guides', showing foreign tourists around the city and taking a cut on any purchases they can be persuaded to make. These sometimes include narcotics, and one day I met Bholā in jubilant mood after he made Rs 17,000 (about £1,000) on a sale of morphine. Despite the fact that he had many times told me of the terrible misfortunes his family have suffered as a result of selling the goods required for cremation, he displayed not the slightest concern about transactions such as these. Public opinion in the area, it is true, was concerned about this particular deal. The reason, however, was not because of the commodity it involved, but because the bargain had been struck with a customer who had first been contacted by another guide. The latter had therefore established a right over the commission on any purchases made by 'his foreigner'. Bholā was forced to hand over half his takings in order to avoid a violent confrontation in which the moral majority would have sided wholly with his adversary. It is clearly not profit, but the profit of death which is problematic.

At this juncture it is necessary to back-track a moment to my earlier discussion of the gift. Given that all transactions associated with death are perilous, it might on the face of it appear that my problem was misconceived, and that it is not *dana* but death which constitutes the real difficulty. Now clearly the obvious answer to this is that it is *all dana* – and not just that which is given during the mortuary rites – which is evil. The point is one to which Fuller (1984: 67f) has accorded due recognition, but – as he notes – the fact remains that in the major north Indian pilgrimage cities like Benares it is death which dominates the religious field (in a way that it does not in the temple towns of the South). It might therefore be argued that in the specific context I describe the prototypical *dana* is the *dana* of death, which – by a kind of halo effect – contaminates all other gifts and renders them problematic. The difficulty with this, however, is that Fuller himself cites a number of sources which clearly show that even in the South similar ideas about gifts (other than those made in connection with death) are by no means absent; while – as Raheja (1985) clearly demonstrates – they certainly exist in a highly elaborated form in certain rural areas of the north where death cannot be said to have the ideological preeminence it is given in sacred centres like Benares or Gaya.

My bold contrast between the moral perils inherent in *dana* and the moral neutrality of commercial transactions demands one further qualification. The acquisition of commercial wealth is a legitimate and laudable objective, but it is one which is ultimately justified by the generosity with which it is then disbursed. 'Let [the merchant] exert

himself to the utmost in order to increase his prosperity in a righteous manner,' recommends Manu (IX: 333), 'and let him zealously give food to all created beings.' Here it is clearly the zealous giving which justifies these utmost exertions, notwithstanding Manu, even to the extent of condoning a manner of appropriation which is not unequivocally righteous. Many myths and legends tell of the hero who resorts to highway robbery in order to defray the costs of renovating a temple, or supporting the Brahmins (e.g. Dirks 1982). The traditional Indian king is recognised as having much in common with the bandit (Shulman 1980); and it is by violence, conquest and plunder that he is supposed to fund the sacrifice, or the gifts which replace it (Heesterman 1959). The merchant's plunder in the market place is clearly a less glorious and heroic mode of acquisition, but it is nonetheless one which need not trouble a sensitive conscience so long as the proceeds are dispensed as *dana*.

If not as *dana*, then at least in generous hospitality and unstinting support for indigent dependants. The model affectionately recalled in Benares is the *rais*, the monied aristocrat of the city's past, of whose eccentrically profligate expenditure a limited repertoire of admiring anecdotes is endlessly repeated. The miserly and tight-fisted are contemptuously dismissed with the maxim *sala, sanph banega* – 'that wife's brother' (i.e. that low-grade bastard) 'he'll become a snake' – a maxim which calls on the notion that one who dies with buried treasure will be reborn as a snake which is condemned to keep constant guard over its hoard. The more general point here is illustrated by an exchange in E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* where Dr Aziz says, 'If money goes, money comes. If money stays, death comes. Did you ever hear that useful Urdu proverb?' to which Fielding responds that his proverbs include, 'A penny saved is a penny earned', and on such the British empire rests. So while at one level there is marked contrast between the dangers inherent in commercial profit and the dangers inherent in *dana*, at another level both kinds of acquisition are united in their subordination to the same cultural imperative: that the objects of exchange must be kept in continual circulation. Not only, I would add, does this apply to gifts and commodities, for as I have argued elsewhere (Parry 1985a), a central preoccupation of much Hindu ritual discourse is the proper circulation and transformation of both food and the souls of the dead, and it is this process of circulation which maintains the cosmic and social orders.<sup>9</sup>

Nor, of course, is my contrast intended to imply that attitudes to money and commercial profit are entirely profane and matter-of-fact. To the contrary, here too it is surrounded by 'magic and necromancy'. Precious metals are sometimes said to multiply if they are offered in front of an image of Laksmi, and the beneficence of the goddess is invoked at

the festival of Divali when the merchant worships his account books. Money 'breeds' money, though in the domain of ritual discourse it does so through the mediation of the divine power of the goddess, and not by virtue of its intrinsic fecundity. Again, there are certain benign ghosts who sometimes enter into a secret pact with a living person, whom they reward with handsome munificence for some trivial daily service. But this is no more like Taussig's devil contract than the worship of Lakshmi is like the baptism of the banknote. Though, as in Cauca, what these examples suggest is that wealth is acquired with the aid of supernatural forces, these forces are not the work of the devil and are not productive of death and damnation. The world of money and the world of commodities is not intrinsically evil.

### Some moral evaluations of the market

The comparison with medieval Europe which I have invoked invites the question of how we might account for this kind of variation in moral evaluation. A satisfactory solution to this problem would clearly need to take account of a whole range of factors, not least amongst them considerations of a material order. Here I can only begin to touch on certain aspects of the wider *ideological* context which seem to me to shed some light on the contrast.

One of the most persistent criticisms levelled against the medieval merchant was that he sold something which he could not possess, for his 'profit implied a mortgage on time, which was supposed to belong to God alone' (Le Goff 1980: 29). Labour, which the theologians of an earlier age had represented as a punishment for the Fall, had by the twelfth or thirteenth centuries acquired a new dignity as an activity which glorified and enjoyed the blessing of God; a re-valuation marked by the appearance in iconography of such themes as Noah's construction of the ark, or the building of the Tower of Babel (Gurevich 1985: 264-5). Since man was made in the image of God, his work should emulate God's work: *creation*. The problem with the merchant, however, was that he created nothing, and his profit was therefore fraudulent, as was that of the usurer who accumulated money even as he slept. 'Medieval ideology,' as Le Goff (1980: 61) observes, 'was materialistic in the strict sense. Only the production of matter had value. The abstract value defined by capitalist economy eluded its grasp, disgusted it, and was condemned by it.' In the Hindu context such ideas seem wholly alien. The gods are bound by time like men, and certainly do not own it. Physical labour is not on the whole highly esteemed; far less is it represented as an emulation of cosmogony. Vishnu's creation of the universe is not some kind of prodigious feat of engineering: it is the product of prolonged austerities

and sacrifice. Nor, above all, is work preeminently a question of the production and transformation of matter. For the most part Hindu thought has rejected the kind of thoroughgoing materialism to which Le Goff refers, and which provided the medieval world with such a powerful ideological basis for its condemnation of commerce.

An even more important aspect of the matter concerns, I suggest, the way in which the moral and the politico-economic orders are held to be related to each other. As is well known, Dumont (1970) argues that Hindu thought posits a radical separation between the realm of *dharma* over which the Brahman presides and the realm of *artha* under the jurisdiction of the king. While unequivocally preeminent in terms of ritual status, the Brahman is unashamedly dependent in politico-economic terms. The distinction is therefore far stricter than that which medieval Christianity drew between the spiritual and temporal domains, for 'in the Indian case, there is no attempt to reintroduce a univocal or unilinear rank order as in medieval Roman Catholicism where the Church and the Pope claimed supremacy in temporal matters' (Dumont 1971: 69).

The term *artha* refers not only to the realm of politico-economic power which is the third of the four conventionally enumerated goals of human existence, but more generally also has the sense of 'means'. Thus *artha*, as material and coercive power, is the 'means' by which man may attain the sensual delights of *kama* and sustain the moral order of *dharma*. What Hindu thought rejects is that these means should become an ultimate end. *Artha* must be pursued in conformity with the hierarchically superior dictates of *dharma* (Malamoud 1981; Shah 1981). The explicit implication of Dumont's discussion, however, is that the strict disjunction between the two realms – and the thoroughgoing ideological subordination of the politico-economic domain – cuts it loose from its moral moorings and deprives it of real meaning. 'In traditional India, significance is attached exclusively to the immutable model of society and the truth, the model of *dharma*; as a result everything else, devoid of sense, can change at will' (Dumont 1970: 196). Denied 'the slightest value or intellectual interest', almost anything goes; and to a significant extent it is this devaluation which has condemned the Indian polity to perpetual instability. By only a slight extension of the same argument, we can see that commerce suffers a similar semantic impoverishment, and the condemnation of its abuses is consequently robbed of real force. Emptied of moral content it cannot be a major source of moral peril.

What is also possibly relevant here is the radically different nature of the rural-urban division in the two contexts. In Europe the city early on became the main centre of manufacture and locus of exchange, and the hostility to money and commerce was closely associated with an hostility

to urbanism in general (Duby 1982: 220; Little 1978: 35). The expansion of the urban centres, and of the commercial economy they harboured, prompted a strident backlash against both in which townspeople were identified with money-lenders as the spawn of the devil (Gurevich 1985: 272). In pre-colonial India, by contrast, manufacture remained – as Raychaudhuri notes (1983: 22) – a predominantly rural activity, and the same kind of division ‘of economic functions between town and country . . . did not emerge’. Market exchange, and money as the means of exchange, were not consequently damned by their association with an alien urban environment.

In Western Europe, the urban and commercial expansion of the later Middle Ages entailed, of course, a progressive subversion of what has been called the ‘closed estate economy’ (Pirenne 1967), and of the autarky of the village community where production was primarily for use and for exchange within the local community, where those who visited the market for the purchase of essential items were not really integrated into it (Braudel 1985: 55), and where the distribution of prestige goods between distant communities was as likely to be effected by gift and plunder as by trade (Grierson 1971; Geary 1986). Calling on the authority of Aristotle, whose writings penetrated Christendom in 1240 and were given currency by Thomas Aquinas (Braudel 1985: 560), medieval theorists criticised money and the trade from the standpoint of this disappearing world of self-sufficiency and production for use.

For Aristotle, the distinction between householding (*oikonomia*) and commerce (*kapelike*) is a distinction between natural and unnatural economic activity. Trading for gain is ‘contrary to nature’; trade can only be ‘natural’ in so far as it is a requirement of self-provisioning, and in this ‘natural economy’ money produces no offspring. Prices should therefore be set so as to exclude profit; the ruling principle of exchange should be one of equality and mutual benefit, and of all the ways of getting wealth lending at interest is the most perverted (Aristotle 1962; Polanyi 1971). The Greek god Hermes – a trickster and thief whose career begins as the god of boundary stones – evolves logically in the deity of those professional boundary-crossers and swindlers, the merchants, recalling that in the Middle Ages the merchant was supposed to carry a thief’s thumb as a talisman and that the two professions shared St Nicholas as their patron saint (Curtin 1984: 6). In both cases commerce and larceny are seen as having a natural affinity, and in both cases this judgement derives from a firm ideological commitment to an order premised on the values of autarky and production for the use of the producers. Similarly, Marx’s mistrust of money and (market) exchange was nourished by a certain nostalgia for the world of use-value and self-provisioning. Exchange and the abstract money medium from which it is inseparable were con-

demned by Marx as agents of individualisation and of the dissolution of the communal bonds which had obtained when production was for use (see the Introduction to this volume).

It is also out of this same ideological commitment to a traditional householding economy oriented towards self-sufficiency that many peasant communities have condemned production for exchange. This was the situation which Taussig described, and Gudeman’s account of the erstwhile economy of a Panamanian village suggests something strikingly similar. The household was the primary unit of production and consumption, some goods and labour being traded within the community, though this was seen in terms of the exchange of equivalents and was unproblematic. Profit in rural/urban exchanges, however, was considered mysterious and morally equivocal; and commodities purchased for cash on the market were classified as ‘luxuries’ and ‘vices’, seen as a dangerous drain on subsistence needs, vaguely imbued with evil and sometimes said to be obtained only by submitting to the influence of the devil (Gudeman 1986: 12–13).

The argument which I would like to propose here is that by contrast with the self-image of autarky and of production for the use of the producer which we encounter in all these cases, the caste order is founded on the fundamentally different premise of a division of labour between castes and their interdependence. Production is not for direct use; and neither the household, nor the caste, nor even the local community is an ideally self-sufficient entity. Despite the best endeavours of nineteenth-century British administrators to discover it, the village as a ‘little republic’ sufficient unto itself does not, and did not, exist – neither in practice nor in ideology. Nor can such a unit be specified at any level. My contention, then, is that the absence of any outright antipathy to money and commerce has to be understood in the context of the absence of an ideology of autarky from which this antipathy has so often drawn its force.

The point might be generalised by reference to Melanesian ethnography, where we often encounter in extreme form this quite different kind of ideological world in which society sees itself as constituted by exchange.<sup>10</sup> Here, one might suppose, the moral evaluation of modern money and market exchange is likely to be very different from that characteristic of the autarkic worlds to which I have just referred, and the evidence seems to suggest that this is indeed the case.

The fear which preoccupied the Kaliai of West New Britain in 1971 was that the independence of Papua New Guinea would bring the rule of money before they were ready for it, though in principle they looked forward eagerly to the new dispensation (Counts and Counts 1977). At that time the expectation was that existing social relations would be

replaced by monetary ones. This expectation was largely self-fulfilling, and the ethnographers describe how over a period of only ten years even food and labour became commodities for which a monetary payment was *legitimately* demanded from close kin and affines – even from a spouse. For the Highlands of New Guinea, Strathern (1978, 1979b) similarly documents the enthusiasm with which Hageners took to commercial agriculture and incorporated money – the super-valuable of the White Man and the source of his enviable power – into their ceremonial exchange system.

In exchange systems of this sort, of course, the gift is expected to return to its donor with increment. Far from being naturally barren, exchange almost automatically attracts a 'profit' or 'increment'.<sup>11</sup> By contrast with the set of ideas which could condemn the medieval merchant for creating nothing, no similar charge of parasitism could possibly be levelled here at those who control the realm of exchange – for transactors *are* producers when exchange *is* production, an apparently inexhaustible source of increase. In such a world the propensity of money to breed more money must indeed appear as natural as pears growing on pear trees. Anything traditional valuables can do, the modern super-valuable can surely do better.

It might, I recognise, be objected that by emphasising the continuity between incremental exchange systems of the *moka* variety and Marx's general formula of capital accumulation, I am ignoring a fundamental contrast which emerges from Gregory's (1982) synthetic view of Melanesian exchange systems: the contrast between gift exchange systems of this kind in which the objective is to maximise net outgoings (to out-give), and commodity exchange in which the objective is to maximise net receipts or profits (to out-take). This contrast, however, is surely greatly over-drawn for if – as Gell (n.d.) points out – it were literally true the Big Man would tend to seek out 'rubbish men' as exchange partners, and ply them with gifts in the confident expectation that they would never be repaid. Of this there is, of course, no evidence and gifts are generally given to those from whom there is every expectation of an incremental return. As a consequence experience shows that with sound financial management capital grows. Moreover, in many traditional Melanesian societies commodity exchange in the form of barter relations with trade partners on the periphery of one's social universe does not seem to possess a radically different character from many gift exchange relationships firmly within that universe. In both cases (and again I am indebted to Gell) an enduring bond is established, and in both the objects exchanged seem to be definitively alienated. Gregory's neat opposition between inalienable gifts exchanged between mutually dependent transactors, and alienable commodities exchanged between reciprocally

independent transactors, does scant justice to these very real continuities.

But if money breeding money appears as natural, and I suggest as innocent, as the pears on the tree, it is clearly not as easily intelligible or manageable. Hence the many cargo cults which focus centrally on this problem (cf. Burrige 1969). Take the Red Box money cult, for example, which was concerned with ensuring a self-generating supply of money for the future and 'clearly expressed [not only] a desire for inordinate amounts of cash, to make Hageners equal if not superior to Europeans, [but] also a wish to know money's true origins and so to manage its supply for themselves' (Strathern 1979a). No moral qualms here about the self-expanding nature of money as capital; only the problem of how to accomplish it. And significantly the postulated solution almost invariably involves the agency of essentially helpful supernatural beings like God or the ancestors, while the cult's failure to propagate money magically is likely to be attributed to the moral failures of its followers (Morauta 1974: 43–5).

Stent's (1977) discussion of a cargo cult concerned with the miraculous manufacture of money in Maprik sub-district in the early 1970s brings all this out with admirable clarity, and with this we return to the baptism of the banknote with which I began. The aim of the cult was to multiply silver coins, by a magical process sometimes described as 'baptism', in a so-called *faktori* constructed for this purpose. An alternative rite took place in a graveyard, where God would be called on to bless a banknote inserted between the leaves of a Bible, and where quantities of money would subsequently be found lying around on the ground. Throughout these magical rites 'traditional practices associated with (the increase of) yams were taken over and modified. The old spells, which called upon the spirits, were replaced by prayers to a new God, and the magical stones and relics . . . were replaced by the Bible.' Clearly no devil contract here, the magical increase occurs with the blessing of God, through the power of Christ and in full view of the ancestors in the graveyard. What's more, the sums so far alleged to have been produced were regarded as *samting nating*, mere petty cash. Real abundance would flow, it was said, when everyone in the community participated. The contrast with Cauca could hardly be more marked. Rather than satisfying the greed of a rapacious and anti-social individual, here the baptism of money is not only sanctioned by God but works only to the full when it is for the benefit of the whole community.

Having begun with Cauca where the radical opposition in the moral evaluation of gift and commodity exchange is of a sort familiar from much in our own cultural background, and having focused in some detail on a case which in certain ways strikingly inverts these evaluations, we

end here I believe in a world from which this kind of opposition in moral loading is largely absent. When some anthropologists insist on the fundamental discontinuity between gift and commodity exchange (e.g., Gregory 1982), while others emphasise their fundamental continuity (e.g., Firth 1973), we might be well advised to keep this kind of cultural variation in mind.

Underneath such variation, however, I think it is undeniable that there are a limited number of extremely broad principles in terms of which most cultures are likely to judge exchanges of different kinds.<sup>12</sup> In almost every society, for example, there are some values which cannot – or should not – be exchanged at all. Moral peril consequently attaches to attempts to make them into objects of transaction. Similarly, with exchanges which are supposed to be governed by what Sahlins (1972) calls ‘generalised’ reciprocity but which are treated as a matter of ‘balanced’ or ‘negative’ reciprocity. Condemnation, that is, attaches to transactions in which the *quid pro quo* element is properly implicit, long-term and not subject to precise calculation but which are conducted in such a way as to make this element overt and explicit. Finally, and allowing for considerable cultural variation in the definition of these terms, any exchange is likely to be judged by whether it is ‘equitable’ and ‘fair’ – and by definition those which are not are condemned when they occur within the boundaries of the moral community (however defined).

While medieval Europe and the Hindu context I have considered can be contrasted in terms of the *type* of exchange which most obviously represents a dire moral peril (commodity or gift), it must be recognised that at another level it is common considerations of this order which inform these evaluations. Both the medieval merchant and the Benares priest are condemned for ‘selling’ something that is only dubiously regarded as an object of exchange at all: time which belongs to God alone in the first case, salvation and atonement for sin in the second. While according to the teachings of Aristotle trade should be conducted only on the basis of ‘balanced’ reciprocity, the profits of the medieval merchant seemed to represent a naked instance of ‘negative’ reciprocity. More radically, the Hindu priest (and the wife-taking affines who demand exorbitant dowries) are seen as subverting the ethic of the ‘pure’ gift by treating such transactions as a species of commerce. In each instance a transaction which should serve other ends (whether this is the reproduction of the self-provisioning community or salvation) has become a mere matter of egotistical calculation and short-term individual advantage. ‘Negative’ reciprocity has replaced ‘generalised’ or ‘balanced’ reciprocity; ruthless self-seeking the solidarity and interdependence of those who are party to the transaction. But above all, the exchanges both of the merchant and the priest stand condemned on grounds of equity. The

priest is tainted by the suspicion that in reality he is getting something for nothing and merely parasitically appropriates offerings primarily intended for others; the merchant by the suspicion that he created nothing and his profit was therefore fraudulent. In neither case is it absolutely clear that those who most demonstrably benefit by the exchange have actually contributed anything at all.

#### Notes

- 1 I gratefully acknowledge various extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper from André Béteille, Maurice Bloch, John Comaroff, Chris Fuller, Murray Milner, Gloria Raheja, Tom Trautmann and Peter van der Veer. Thanks are also due to David D’Avray and Janet Nelson for guidance on the literature on medieval Europe; to Lisette Josephides for some cautionary remarks on the Melanesian material, and to Alfred Gell for permission to cite his splendidly incautious unpublished paper.
- 2 Fieldwork in Benares was carried out between September 1976 and November 1977 (supported by the Social Science Research Council) and in August 1978, August–September 1981 and March–April 1983 (supported by the London School of Economics and Political Science). I am deeply obliged to Virendra Singh for his language instruction, and to him and Om Prakash Sharma for their research assistance.
- 3 Certain items – like gold, an elephant, horse, water-buffalo, emeralds and sesame seeds – are sometimes said to be especially dangerous to the recipient, but specie is never listed among them. With the exception of sesame seed, all of these things are distinguished by their high value; but others of equal value are not generally mentioned. I am only able to offer a series of more or less *ad hoc* explanations for the items regarded as a particular peril. Elephants, for example, are preeminently associated with royalty, and the textual sources endlessly emphasise how the gifts of the king represent a special danger for the Brahman. Sesame seed, I was told, should be included amongst the worst kinds of *dana* because it is given in the name of the deceased, and in the expectation that each grain prolongs his or her residence in heaven by a day. Since it is explicitly given ‘in exchange’ (*badle men*), it is especially ‘bad *dana*’ (*kudana*).
- 4 In view of van der Veer’s (1985) recent criticism of my earlier discussion (Parry 1980), I would like to reassert this last point with particular emphasis.
- 5 This contrast between the proceeds of *dana* and the proceeds from other occupations is endlessly reiterated by my informants. Two further brief illustrations must suffice. The first concerns the wife’s brother of a Benares priest who had come to visit from Allahabad and to whom I was one day introduced. That same evening my new acquaintance came to see me with an extremely pressing invitation to finance a shop he proposed to start. He confirmed that his family controlled lucrative priestly rights in Allahabad, but indignantly denied that he himself would ever exercise them or be willing to utilise such money to fund his commercial ambitions, for – as he emphatically explained – ‘I do not like to beg.’ The second example is that of a priestly

- informant who dabbles as a part-time freelance journalist and derives a small and irregular income from the somewhat scurrilous pieces he contributes to the local press. If his articles yield Rs 50 in the month that money remains with him, he repeatedly told me; whereas the much larger amounts he obtains from the exercise of his priestly rights go god only knows where. Though it never struck me that these journalistic earnings (or indeed the profits of the coal-seller mentioned earlier) were particularly hard-earned, they were incessantly contrasted with the money of *dana* as *khare pasina ki kamai*.
- 6 The only circumstance in which they move back in this direction is when an exorcist diagnoses that an affliction emanates from such a source, and coerces the troublesome spirit to return to where it had come from.
  - 7 I am indebted here to a helpful comment from David White.
  - 8 I have not myself done any systematic research on mercantile activity in Benares and my evidence is largely impressionistic. I am convinced, however, that the basic contrast I draw between the moral dangers of *dana* and the relatively neutral moral aura of commerce is a valid one.
  - 9 For a discussion of the similar ideological premium placed on passing on knowledge, see Parry 1985b.
  - 10 More accurately, one should perhaps speak of an ideological world in which *men* see society as constituted by exchange. The extent to which women share this vision is open to question, which is not surprising given that the effect of this ideological elaboration of exchange is a radical devaluation of women.
  - 11 I recognise that 'increment' and 'profit' are not the same thing: one sustains the relationship and (re-)creates a debt; while under most circumstances the other does not. My central point nevertheless stands – in exchange systems of this sort valuables appear to have a self-expanding character.
  - 12 I am particularly indebted here to Murray Milner whose criticisms of an earlier draft have forced me to acknowledge these continuities.

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