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In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in theories of the 'gift' and 'gifting' among those interested in cultural and religious studies. These scholars are reexamining the claim made by French sociologist, Marcel Mauss, that, among indigenous peoples and those whose cultures have developed independently from the now highly capitalistic cultures born from Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian pasts, an economy exists in which ongoing, reciprocal exchange is consciously emphasized. In *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (first appearing in French in 1925 as '*Essai sur le don*'), Mauss reveals that in most clan-based, indigenous societies, there is a strong awareness of interdependence and less concern with self-interest or the accrual of personal wealth than in many other societies.

3. Therefore, Mauss shows, things circulated in these societies are not usually thought of in terms of abstract exchange values.¹ 'Due to this lack of abstraction, exchanged things are objectified to a lesser degree than they are in other economic settings. Also, participants in exchanges remain more aware of the roles of the personal agencies involved in exchange. In other words, the economically, socially, and often religiously important parts played by those involved in exchange are usually recognized and valued by all. Mauss thus argues that the term 'gift' best describes things exchanged by indigenous peoples. The concept carried by this term is in direct opposition to the common notion of 'commodity,' referring to things perceived, in highly individualistic, market-based societies, as objects symbolic of wealth to be accumulated. In this essay, I will briefly evaluate, from an anthropological perspective, philosopher Jacques Derrida's reexamination of Mauss' basic theory of the gift. This evaluation will reveal that Derrida's work helps scholars account for the ontological, epistemological, and religious consequences of exchange across cultures.² It will also show, however, that the usefulness of Derrida's work is limited by his semiotic perspective, which results in a failure to consider fully the material reality and cultural importance of certain exchanged things.
4. Mauss' work, and the study of economy, in general, has received so much attention from scholars lately because of its religious implications. Mauss, himself, suggests quite simply that there are 'moral and religious reasons' for the exchange of gifts (Mauss 1990, 7). These 'reasons' have been explored extensively ever since the publication of Mauss' work.³ A short examination of the term, 'economy,' however, helps explain that, while exchange is often motivated by the institutional rules of discrete religious traditions, the connection between economy and religion is really much more profound.

¹I use the word "thing" to refer broadly to any entity, which may have the ontological status of either an object or a subject. Services, too, are sometimes exchanged as things.

²'Ontology' is here understood as a culture's shared categorization of beings and general perception of being. Ontological issues include such existential concerns as personhood, life, death, and so on. This anthropological understanding of ontology derives from the work of psychological anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell. His linguistic work among the Algonkian-speaking Ojibwa revealed to Euro-American scholars that the Ojibwa live in a highly animate cosmos in which many 'other-than-human' beings share the characteristics of personhood with humans (Hallowell 1975).

³Along with the work of Jacques Derrida explored in this essay, anthropologist Maurice Godelier's *The Enigma of the Gift* best exemplifies the recent examinations of religion and gifting. Godelier argues that, in the contemporary West, things that are *not* exchanged often have greater religious value than do exchanged items.

5. The etymology of 'economy' suggests the word refers to an arrangement of the world, an arrangement that includes activities beyond the traditionally recognized 'economic' activities of production and appropriation (Oxford English Dictionary). World arrangement also includes and results from transfer and exchange between persons. Because entities capable of giving, receiving, and being exchanged gain social definition through this economic activity, world arrangement also contributes to the determination of being and relations between beings. The very acts of transfer and exchange, in other words, define which entities can participate intentionally as persons in the intersubjective acts of giving and receiving. Economy is thus a means of social orientation. In his own study of the gift, anthropologist Maurice Godelier points to this fact as it manifests itself in the European and Euro-American worlds. 'Without money, without income,' he writes, 'there is no social existence at all, in fact, material or physical' (Godelier, 2). Godelier concludes rightly that 'peoples' social and material existence depends on the economy' (2). This is the case in all societies – even those without 'money.' Transfer and exchange determine social status, personhood, and thus our very sense of 'being' relative to all other beings.
6. Because exchange occurs not only between individual persons, but between persons with specific cultural backgrounds, whether shared or different, exchange is also a form of cultural orientation. Exchange can, in fact, occur among all the beings of a cultural universe, particularly if that universe is a highly animated and personal one, as it is for many indigenous peoples. Exchange is therefore an act that may orient persons intersubjectively and socially on the individual, intracultural, intercultural, and universal levels. In this way, economy impacts and even helps shape all spheres of existence. Furthermore, because of its orienting effect, economy is an inherently religious phenomenon through which persons establish, maintain, and readjust their positions relative to all other beings in meaningful ways.⁴ Resisting compartmentalization, the economic concepts of gift and commodity thus implicate all dimensions of life, including those represented as 'religious.'
7. Now, it is no longer just ethnographers and sociologists who study gift giving and other forms of exchange. Recognizing its broad implications, philosophers and theologians are studying exchange practices too. Moreover, many scholars have come to recognize that in today's highly complex world, gift economies and commodity economies are not entirely discrete. Exchange occurs *across* and not just within cultures. Consequently, gifting is now studied in European and Euro-American contexts, even if reciprocity is not consciously emphasized in those settings. Regardless of their cultural focus, however, scholars are increasingly paying greater attention to the act of exchange and how that act is signified. They are also, however, paying less attention to the things exchanged. This is unfortunate because the culturally ascribed status of exchanged things can tell us as much about the ontological, epistemological, and religious concerns of the people involved in economic activities as the exchange itself does. In many indigenous societies, exchange items, especially ceremonial materials, are understood to have inherent value and, very often, living qualities. In market-based societies, these exchanged things are symbolic of wealth.
8. Therefore, their inherent value is ignored, and there is no possibility of them having lives of their own; they are perceived only as objects. A few words about the ceremonial materials of the confederated Blackfoot peoples of Montana and Alberta will help illustrate this difference

⁴The work of Charles Long is particularly helpful in gaining an understanding of the relationship between orientation and religion (Long 1990, 7, 107 - 108).

in perspective between indigenous and European and Euro-American societies.⁵ 'Medicine bundles' are the most important ceremonial materials in traditional Blackfoot culture.⁶ The bundles vary, but a general description of their appearance is possible. Medicine bundles are usually skin or cloth-wrapped bundles containing other animal skins and parts, rocks, plants, earth paints, pipes, and various other items.⁷ They may be as small as a pendant worn around the neck, or large enough to require horses or vehicles for transportation. They vary not only according to their contents, but also according to their religious roles.

9. Blackfoot traditionalists understand that their bundles are intricately tied to a cultural economy, which they refer to as a 'system of value.'⁸ In this system, all beings are understood to have a degree of personhood and to be able to share their skills and powers as persons with other beings, including humans. The resulting social relations are of the greatest value to Blackfoot peoples. Medicine bundles actually embody and make present to humans many of the nonhuman beings who can relate socially with humans and offer their beneficence.
10. Like most other indigenous economies, the Blackfoot system of value emphasizes that social relations must be reciprocal. For this reason, Blackfoot medicine bundles are ritually cared for by human Blackfoot keepers. This care is a means of reciprocating their beneficence. Bundles, and the position of caring for them, are regularly transferred every four to ten years so that relations with the powerful beings embodied in the bundles are expanded and renewed continually. The physical bundles themselves, and the relationships they make possible, are understood by the Blackfoot peoples to be living 'gifts' from the other beings of the universe.⁹ In the highly individualistic worlds of European and Euro-American collectors, however, bundles appropriated from the Blackfoot peoples are usually not regarded as living gifts.
11. Instead, they are seen as 'artifacts' or pieces of 'primitive art.' As such, the bundles are treated as mere objects that symbolize wealth and which should be accumulated rather than exchanged or transferred regularly. They are treated as commodities.
12. Having established an understanding of the epistemological gap between the ways that an indigenous group of peoples and Europeans and Euro-Americans understand the ontological

⁵'Blackfoot' is preferred as both a singular and plural designation by most Blackfoot people and is the accepted scholarly spelling. 'Blackfeet' is the legal designation for the Piegiens of Montana. The four confederated Blackfoot tribal divisions reside on separate reserves in Alberta, Canada and on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. Each division belongs to the Algonkian language family. The three Canadian divisions are the *Kainaa* 'Kainai or Bloods, *Siksik* 'Blackfoot proper, and *Aap_tohsipi(I)kani* 'Northern Peigan or Pikunis. The Montana division is the *Aamsk_pipi(I)kani* 'Southern Peigan (note the different spelling for the U.S. division) or Pikunis. They refer to themselves collectively as *Niits_tapiiksi*, meaning 'real people.'

⁶My use of the term 'traditional' is used in reference to those people who perceive the world according to the guidelines set by their ancestors and who maintain continuity with the past through established ceremonial practices. It is important to acknowledge that traditional peoples have adapted their practices to the contemporary world, while still maintaining this continuity.

⁷General description of bundles derives from personal observation at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary as well as such representative sources as Ewers, Grinnell, and McClintock

⁸Interview conducted by the author with John and Carol Murray in September 2000 at their residence on the Blackfoot reservation in September 2000. Carol Murray is a Southern Peigan tribal member and past president of Blackfoot Community College. John Murray is also a Southern Peigan tribal member and former director of Blackfeet Studies at Blackfoot Community College. Also interviewed was Joyce T. Spoonhunter, Southern Peigan tribal member and Cultural Coordinator for the Blackfoot Nation. Joyce was interviewed by the author in July 2000 at the Red Crow Caf' in Browning, on the Blackfoot Reservation.

⁹Interview conducted by the author with Allan Pard, Northern Peigan tribal member in November 2000. Also interviewed was Frank Weasel Head, Kainai tribal member, in August 2001, at the Weasel Head Residence on the Blood Reserve.

status of certain exchange items, let me return to Derrida and the Maussian theory of gift. Derrida is perhaps one of the most recognized scholars of the philosophical and theological traditions to turn his attention toward economy in recent decades. Like many others, his attention is more focused upon the phenomenon of gifting, and how that phenomenon is signified, than upon the status of the gift. His explorations of economy are very important, however, because he approaches the ontological and epistemological importance of transfer and exchange explicitly. He understands that economic practices are interpreted and signified differently in different contexts, and he understands that the activities of transfer and exchange are tied to each society's categorization of being. Ongoing, reciprocal transfers or exchanges bestow subjectivity and social identity. Because of their cyclical nature, they are tied to the living, processional movement of social existence. Derrida also understands, however, that this means transfers which are *not* ongoing arrest social identity and highlight mortality and the end of social existence.

13. In his recent book, *The Gift of Death*, Derrida makes it clear that his ultimate goal in analyzing economy is neither anthropological nor cross-cultural. He is concerned primarily with the theological implications of exchange in those cultures born from Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian pasts. Specifically, he is concerned with exchange in the European, and, by extension, Euro-American, worlds of Christians. He explains the reasons for this in the following passage: "It seems necessary to reinforce the coherence of a way of thinking that takes into account the event of Christian mystery as an absolute singularity, a religion par excellence and an irreducible condition for a joint history of the subject, responsibility, and Europe (Derrida 1993, 2).
14. The 'responsibility' of which Derrida speaks is the perhaps unquenchable need for European and Euro-American societies to overcome an 'ignorance' of their 'history' (2). The European and Euro-American 'history' with which Derrida is concerned is the 'becoming' of the Christian subject. Drawing heavily upon the work of Czech philosopher Jan Patocka, Derrida argues that Christians should acknowledge the ultimately religious significance of economy. Christians should acknowledge that economy is tied to the development of social identities and, paradoxically, not only to life, but also to death. In Derrida's mind, such an acknowledgment will allow people to understand the significance of sacrifice and of generosity 'of giving without the expectation to receive. Because this acknowledgment amounts to a condemnation of self-interest, we can add that it may lead to a very different attitude as well. Recognizing the social and ontological significance of economy may also compel people in the market-driven economies of Europe and America to resist the accumulation of symbolic wealth. Importantly, these two attitudes are not as inconsistent as they may seem. A refusal to accumulate symbolic wealth, after all, means that one must consider the inherent value of exchange items and then always pass them along or give them away. Derrida might simply argue that, *ideally*, one should do this with no expectations of return.
15. An exploration of the complex philosophical and theological issues tied by Derrida to exchange is far beyond the scope of this brief essay. This essay represents only an exploratory, anthropological reading of Derrida's work on gift and economy. This reading is called for because the European and Euro-American Christians addressed by Derrida have never existed in a social vacuum. Their history is one that is characterized by contact, via colonialism and economic exchange, with societies of non-Christian subjects. These non-Christian societies include indigenous peoples, like those of the Blackfoot Confederacy, who are much more aware of the epistemological and ontological significance of exchange than are their European

and Euro-American colonizers. This contact has often resulted in the colonial acquisition of indigenous material culture, while it has usually left indigenous peoples with no greater returns for their losses than suffering, oppression, and diminished cultural vitality. Put simply, indigenous peoples have 'offered up' many material 'gifts,' with tremendous inherent value, to the colonizers of their lands and societies, but they have rarely been reciprocated in similar ways.¹⁰ An indication of this is the fact that many Blackfoot medicine bundles now reside on the walls of private collectors and museums, highly valued as 'artifacts' or pieces of 'primitive art.' They are far-removed from their homes among the Blackfoot peoples, who would care for them as living, beneficent beings and not as commodities.

16. All too often, indigenous peoples, like those of the Blackfoot Confederacy, and their living gifts, have never been allowed to remain or even become subjects in the eyes of their colonizers. This is precisely because the colonizers are ignorant of the epistemological and ontological histories that Derrida addresses. In refusing to reciprocate indigenous peoples in a conscious manner, self-interested colonizers have denied the subjectivity of indigenous peoples, which is granted through the social activity of deliberate exchange. Also, by commodizing indigenous material culture, they have turned the living gifts of indigenous peoples into mere objects, symbolic of wealth.
17. While Derrida does not examine the same history that I am concerned with here, he does address the fact that economic activity is directly, albeit paradoxically, tied to life and death. In the exchanges I have just described, economic activity is also tied to the lives and deaths of entire cultures. All this serves as evidence that Europeans and Euro-Americans are, indeed, irresponsible in their failure to understand the real significance attached to the various economic practices of transfer, exchange, giving, receiving, and so on.
18. So, despite Derrida's attempt to resist a comparative examination of economic activity, he implicates himself in such a study through his concern for historical responsibility. Consequently, this evaluation of his work's usefulness in understanding the gift and related topics, not only in the contexts of the Christian 'West,' but in the wider context of a complex world, characterized by exchanges in and between different sub-contexts, is entirely appropriate. As a philosopher, Derrida is largely divorced from the ethnographic fields that have traditionally emphasized material exchange. Taking a semiotic approach to the study of economy, Derrida focuses upon the terms of exchange rather than its materiality. In so doing, he examines the word, 'gift,' and concludes that this word may mean for most people something very different from what Mauss assumes it does (Derrida 1992, 10). Derrida first explains that in our 'common language and logic' (Indo-European and Greek, respectively, in derivation), the word 'gift' refers to a thing transferred from one person to another (Derrida 1992, 10). He then suggests, however, that if a gift is returned to the giver or if it becomes part of a larger exchange, then it is essentially 'annulled' or 'annihilated' as a gift (Derrida 1992, 12).
19. True gifts must always be given freely and permanently, according Derrida, or they are no longer gifts; they are obligations. Alan Schrift, editor of a recent anthology on the gift, summarizes Derrida's extensive treatment of Maussian theory by stating, "Once the gift is recognized as gift, it is no longer gift; it becomes an obligation that demands reciprocity and once reciprocated, Derrida argues, it has been annulled" (Schrift 1997, 10). Derrida argues that the gift, to the extent of which its existence can be spoken at all, has a sort of negative

¹⁰It's important to note, of course, that indigenous peoples have also lost a great deal of material culture that was never truly offered to cultural outsiders; it was simply taken.

ontology which “defies a metaphysics of presence” (10). Gift exchange, therefore, constitutes an aporia. For Derrida, the exchange of gifts in an explicitly reciprocal economy is ultimately impossible since the true gift must be freely and permanently given.

20. Importantly, Derrida recognizes that all economies are ultimately reciprocal. As illustrated in the exchanges between indigenous peoples and European and Euro-American colonizers described above, even the accumulation of things, which is emphasized by members of market-driven societies, impacts those from whom things are accumulated; they are ‘reciprocated’ with, if nothing else, a deprived condition. Therefore, Derrida’s argument must be understood to pertain to gifts given in all societies, not just those which are indigenous, whether the members of those societies *recognize* the reciprocal nature of exchange or not.
21. Irrespective of Derrida’s argument concerning the impossibility of exchange, the fact remains that many things which are given have a physical presence. Moreover, their presence is often regarded as inherently valuable and even personal in those reciprocity-driven societies in which exchange items are not highly objectivized and ongoing interpersonal relations are emphasized. In these societies, the value of such exchange items is much more than symbolic. It is material. Derrida discusses the sign ‘gift,’ the concept this sign carries in European and Euro-American thought, and its ontological importance, but he never discusses the materiality or ‘thingness’ of tangible exchange items, regardless of whether they are viewed as objects or subjects in a given society. Because of this, Derrida’s ability to help Europeans and Euro-Americans take *full* ‘responsibility’ for their historical interactions with other peoples is limited.
22. Indigenous peoples have given up tangible aspects of their cultures. They have given up lands animated by powerful spirits and ceremonial materials, like the Blackfoot medicine bundles, that embody those spirits. Yet, they have rarely been deliberately or properly reciprocated. Even if one wants to ignore the issue of reciprocity and imagine the losses of indigenous peoples as pure sacrifices, these sacrifices have certainly not been appreciated. It is simply the case that indigenous peoples have been neglected as subjects and persons when the consequences of uneven exchanges have been ignored by self-interested colonizers. It is also the case that the material things given up or taken from indigenous peoples have been neglected as potential subjects and persons too, despite their very physical presence in museums and private collections. These facts must be recognized in any attempt to achieve a responsible and accurate understanding of the history of exchange across cultures.
23. Again, the material things exchanged regularly by indigenous peoples, described as gifts by Mauss (and by the Blackfoot traditionalists), and often accumulated by Europeans and Euro-Americans, are commonly understood in their native societies as living, themselves. Individually, their inherent living qualities are explained in mythic narratives and evidenced in the ritual actions of peoples who, unlike Europeans and Euro-Americans, regard their worlds as highly animate and in continual process. As exchange items, in general, the living qualities of such things are reaffirmed because their very exchange bestows subjectivity and personhood to their exchangers and allows their society to persist as a collection of social actors. They help maintain social life. These living gifts are rarely objectivized or deprived of subjectivity in their native contexts precisely because they are continually exchanged and regarded anew by different persons again and again. Conversely, when these things are accumulated and no longer exchanged, when they are regarded as having only symbolic and not inherent value, they are effectively rendered dead. At the same time, the societies from

which they originate are deprived of the individual beings whose exchange had given each society organization and vitality. It is *this* historical passing of life that accompanies material items of exchange that is overlooked by Derrida.

24. Derrida's semiotic focus is of undeniable value to an understanding of the ontological, epistemological, and religious consequences of exchange because it helps scholars account for the continual de-objectivization of the gift as the exchanged thing is repeatedly resignified. In other words, his perspective accounts, if only implicitly, for the fact that things exchanged can be thought of differently across cultural contexts: as living, inherently valuable things who must be reciprocated in one context and as symbolic objects which should be accumulated in another. Derrida's view of the gift is also valuable because it reinforces Mauss' contention that exchange, as an activity with epistemological and ontological implications, contributes to the social structure and ontological order of the world in which a given society exists.
25. His strengths notwithstanding, the cross-cultural applicability of Derrida's work on the gift and economy is jeopardized by his bias toward defining the gift as something given freely and permanently (Mauss 1990, 12). Clearly, this definition is at odds with Mauss' concept of the gift. This is a curious situation since Derrida implies that Mauss is biased and imposes his own understanding of the gift upon other societies (25-26). To some extent, Derrida may be right. Still, Mauss and many anthropologists after him have plainly shown that reciprocal exchange is a fundamental aspect of most indigenous economies, despite whatever differences may exist between them. Through my own field and textual studies, I have found that reciprocity is strongly emphasized in Blackfoot and related cultures. I have also found that the Blackfoot peoples, when speaking in English, readily describe their regularly transferred ceremonial materials as 'gifts.' It is possible, though, that 'gift' would not be the term chosen for such things in many other societies. This should not be of particular concern, however, since Mauss, writing before the popularization of semiotics and ethnolinguistics, almost certainly uses the term to describe things exchanged reciprocally only as a heuristic device. If, on the other hand, Mauss is truly guilty of reifying the relationship between 'gift' and a particular, narrow definition of the term, then Derrida is at least as guilty of doing the same.
26. In his extensive research upon the etymology of words related to gifting and exchange, linguist Emile Benveniste notes that there is an inherent 'semantic ambivalence' in the Indo-European root *do-* from which such words for gift as the French *don* and the English 'donation' apparently derive (34). Benveniste also explains that several Greek words derive from this root, most of which refer to a gift that requires or results from an obligation to give. Only one of these words refers to a gift 'freely given.' This, combined with other linguistic evidence, serves for Benveniste as confirmation that gifting is generally recognized as a reciprocal exchange practiced in 'ancient societies' (33). When Benveniste was writing, these 'ancient' or, to use Mauss' more nuanced term, 'archaic' societies were regularly compared to contemporary indigenous societies, in which we know that reciprocity is, indeed, usually emphasized (3).
27. In exploring gifts and gifting, Derrida relies upon the same French terms as Mauss, *don* and *donner* ('to give'), which, as mentioned earlier, can be traced to their likely Indo-European root. According to Benveniste, the concepts carried by these words used to connote an ethic of reciprocity or what Mauss calls the 'obligation' to give and to receive (Mauss, 3). Yet, Derrida presumes that, in today's modern cultures, 'gift' refers to a thing given freely and permanently. He asks his readers to accept this 'presupposition' (Derrida 1995, 11). Many European and Euro-American readers may already hold such a presupposition. Unfortunately,

we cannot be so sure that they do. This, coupled with the fact that most indigenous peoples generally understand the act of giving as part of a larger reciprocal event, means that Derrida's definition applies for only a limited number of people in today's world. Philosopher Robert Bernasconi draws attention to the irony of this incongruity by attributing it to a 'lack of historical awareness' on Derrida's part (270). Regardless of this irony, Derrida's definition of the gift is a problematic one, if scholars are to account fully for the consequences of exchange across cultures.

28. Derrida's bias toward understanding gifts as given freely and permanently is a result of his distinctly philosophical and theological interests. He understands the paradigmatic gift as a selfless gift of love, best exemplified in instances of Biblical sacrifice (i.e., Christ's sacrifice and Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac). He also compares the gift variously to God, *Mysterium Tremendum*, the Heideggerian idea of 'Absolute Being,' and other theological formulations of the 'ultimate' (Derrida 1997, 23; 1995, 16, 72, 95, 114). He compares the Christian ignorance of 'history' to an ignorance of pure sacrifice, the 'origin of good,' which allows the Christian to see his or her temporal existence from another perspective 'a perspective from which mortality is recognized and 'triumphed over' (Derrida 1997, 36; 1992, 8, 16, 29). Similarly, the aporia of the true gift represents to Derrida the highly desired impossibility of living in the presence of God while remaining an individual subject.
29. The relationships drawn and comparisons made by Derrida help explain why he defines the true gift in the way that he does. Notice, though, that what 'changes hands' in the primordial sacrifices valorized by Derrida is something immaterial. Love, itself, is intangible. Derrida's attention is thus turned away from the everyday exchange of material things. Such exchange items are overlooked by Derrida, but their loss has great significance to indigenous peoples. Traditional Blackfoot people believe their world was created by Old Man (*Napi*), described sometimes as an aspect of Creator Sun (_Naat__'si_) and other times to have been sent by him to create the human world. Either way, Blackfoot people see Sun as the one who now continues to renew life, who is the ultimate source of the beings embodied in medicine bundles, and who created the material world. Because of this, they follow the example of a well-known culture hero in reciprocating Sun and Old Man; they sacrifice their own comfort and blood during the annual Medicine Lodge or 'Sun Dance' complex of ceremonies. This serves as an example to illustrate the fact that indigenous peoples see even the primordial gifts in their cultures' histories as both tangible gifts and as gifts to be reciprocated, regardless of how Christians see the primordial sacrifices narrated in the Bible.
30. Leaving the philosophical and theological importance of Derrida's work to be explored by other scholars, I now return to the consideration of its anthropological and cross-cultural significance. The greatest value of Derrida's work to those hoping to understand the consequences of exchange across cultures is that he acknowledges the ontological, epistemological, and religious implications of exchange explicitly. Even his semiotic perspective is of value because it helps scholars appreciate the epistemological issue that gifts and other exchange items may be interpreted and signified differently in different cultural contexts. This means that exchange items may be given different ontological statuses in different cultural contexts as well. Derrida's insight may thus help scholars understand how a medicine bundle can be considered a living gift in its native context, while it can be considered an object and commodity in another context.
31. Derrida's semiotic perspective is also a great liability, though, because he relies upon it

almost exclusively. In the end, it is not particularly important that Derrida and Mauss have different understanding of the term, 'gift.' This is simply a semantic issue. The phenomenon of reciprocal exchange and everything it entails exist in all societies, no matter how they are interpreted and signified. In the long run, it hardly matters what terms are used to 'name' exchange or exchange items, as long as those terms are never allowed to gloss over the phenomenal and material reality of these same things as they are perceived by those involved in exchange. Unfortunately, Derrida allows this to happen. He is so focused upon semantics that he overlooks the material reality of the things signified as 'gifts' or as 'non-gifts.'

32. Still, scholars of culture and religion can learn a great deal from Derrida's explorations of the ways in which exchange is connected to life and death. The issue of greatest importance to indigenous peoples today is the vitality of their cultures. The loss of living ceremonial materials, which are supposed to circulate in their societies as living gifts, impacts this vitality negatively. Derrida's reexamination of Mauss' theory of the gift may help scholars appreciate this life and death issue better.
33. Despite Derrida's very philosophical and theological concerns, he calls for a dialogue with anthropologists and other scholars. In *Given Time*, he laments the failure of anthropologists to distinguish and explore the difference between the phenomenon of reciprocal exchange and the idea of the exchanged thing. 'Questions of this type,' he writes, 'should be articulated with other questions that concern the meta-linguistic or meta-ethnological conceptuality orienting this discourse . . . ' (Derrida 1997, 26). This essay represents an attempt to explore such questions and to highlight a third dimension beyond the phenomenon of exchange and the idea of the gift. This third dimension is the material thing exchanged and signified as the gift. Put simply, exchanged things 'matter.' The recognition of this fact will help all scholars involved in the study of culture and religion, whatever their backgrounds may be, gain a more 'responsible' understanding of cross-cultural exchange.
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Notes

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