

**THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF ACTION
AND ITS PROBLEMS: A 'NEW' APPROACH BASED ON
MARCEL MAUSS AND ARISTOTLE**

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Introduction

THE concept of action as an explanatory principle and analytical concept has had a short history in social anthropology. For the British structural-functionalists, action was a functional instrument for maintaining the social structure. The former was thus conceived as being determined by the latter. According to this approach, social structure was the key concept in terms of which action was to be accounted for. In the 1950s, the structural-functionalists came under increasing attack for over-emphasizing the extent to which social structure took the form of a stable equilibrium. As an alternative, a concept of social structure arose that was not a given, stable entity, but the processual outcome and aggregate of social agents' actions. In this way, the concept of action was introduced in order to account for the existence and form of the present social structure. Action had been introduced into social anthropology as an explanatory principle and analytical concept.

In this article I shall investigate the concept of action that was introduced as an alternative to structural-functionalism. By tracing it through some of its manifestations since the 1950s, we shall see that it has essentially remained the same and has thus continued to be the prevalent concept of action in social anthropology since its introduction. Since every concept of action involves a relationship between means and ends, I shall enquire into the conceptual relationship between these elements as they occur in the anthropological concept of action. Against this

background some fundamental problems will be raised, in order to show the need for a different approach. By consulting Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1980) and Mauss's *The Gift* (1990), I shall try to outline a new concept of action, namely communicative action, which is fundamental to, and a precondition for, the traditional concept of action as instrumental action.

The Anthropological Concept of Action as Instrumental Action and its Problems

The demise of structural-functionalism and the introduction of action as an analytical concept was inaugurated by Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1964). In his historical study of the changing social organization of the Kachin of north-east Burma, Leach focuses on the oscillation between the egalitarian form of organization, *gumlao*, and the hierarchical form, Shan. This oscillation, which leaves most Kachin groups in the intermediate form *gumsa*, is brought about by the tension between the egalitarian kinship ideology of the Kachin and the hierarchical implications of their practice of classificatory cross-cousin marriage. This tension is accommodated by the ambiguity and openness of the social structure. The conceptual structure regarding social statuses and approved relations between these statuses is, according to Leach, compatible with both the egalitarian ideal of the Kachin and the hierarchical ideal of their neighbouring Shan. It is this ambiguity which enables historical change in Kachin social organization:

The overall process of structural change comes about through the manipulation of these alternatives [presented by the social structure] as a means of social advancement. Every individual of a society, each in his own interest, endeavours to exploit the situation as he perceives it and in so doing the collectivity of individuals alters the structure of the society itself. (1964: 8)

Historical change in Kachin society is the unintended outcome of the actions of the individuals making it up. The end in this form of action is the individuals' social advancement, or, as Leach says, power, prestige, and esteem. The means is the ambiguous conceptual matrix of the social structure.

Leach's analysis did not arise *ex nihilo* but was part of an intellectual trend. Firth's (1954) distinction between 'social structure' as a formal arrangement of relationships and 'social organization' as the actual relationships enacted by social agents resonates well with Leach's approach. The so-called Manchester School's emphasis on conflict and the contestation of norms arising from individuals pursuing their interests, and on how these conflicts and their resolutions are constitutive of society, is an analogous example of such thinking (Gluckman 1955, Turner 1957, Van Velsen 1967). Finally, Barth's analysis of the Swat Pathans (1959) builds directly on his mentor Leach's approach to social life. In the post-war era, the term 'methodological individualism' came to be used to refer to conceptions

of social reality as the aggregate outcome of agents' actions for the achievement of social and material goods.

Since its inception in the early 1950s, methodological individualism has been under attack from various angles. From a Marxist perspective, Asad (1972) criticizes Barth for over-emphasizing the degree to which Pathan individuals have freedom of choice rather than being structurally constrained and disempowered, the latter assumption making them analysable in terms of the concept of class. From a more relativist perspective, Ortner (1984) criticizes methodological individualists for operating with an overly one-sided concept of motivation as selfish interest at the expense of other, more emotional factors in motivation. Ardener (1989), for his part, historicizes, deconstructs, and thus shows the social specificity of the notion of 'behaviour', a notion which others have unproblematically placed at the foundation of methodological individualism. And, finally, James (1973) shows the logical contradiction inherent in Barth's notion of free human agents whose actions can still be scientifically predicted. Some of these criticisms were acknowledged and an attempt was made to accommodate them in a collection of papers appearing under the auspices of the ASA (Kapferer 1976). However, in addressing some of these criticisms, the writers failed to question the fundamental tenets of methodological individualism.

Without disregarding the validity of the above critiques, it may be remarked that they do not address the main problem concerning methodological individualism, namely the relationship between means and ends in the conception of human action that it advocates. Leach claims that all action can be interpreted as a freely chosen attempt to maximize personal advantage, wherein human agents conceive of goals and choose expedient means for their realization. In this account, human action is conceived as instrumental action, a form of action which attempts to realize an end which is preconceived and which thus precedes the actual action. Since the end is preconceived and precedes the action, instrumental action involves a conceptual distinction between ends and means, between planning and execution. That Leach's conception of social action involves such a conceptual separation of ends and means is clear when he says that 'the structure of the situation is largely independent of its cultural form' (1964: 16). 'Cultural form' is the expression of the conceptual matrix of social statuses, which is claimed to be independent of the social situation. The ideal social structure is thus conceptually independent of social action. Social organization, or Kachin sociality, is the unintended by-product of this action and therefore an independent end of this form of action.

The problem with this concept of human action is that the ends and means of instrumental action lead a conceptually dependent existence. In order for an agent to conceive of some end and the means to realize it, these ends and means must already be meaningful to the agent. The conceptualization of ends and of the means appropriate to realize these ends are therefore dependent upon meaningfulness for their existence—that is, the ends and the means must be part of the agent's reality. Instrumental action, as a form of action seeking to realize a preconceived and preceding end, is therefore dependent upon some notion of social reality for its existence. Social reality can therefore not be the unintended by-product of

instrumental action: rather, the ends and means of the instrumental action are the products of social reality. In other words, instrumental action is conceptually and temporally dependent upon social reality for its existence, not vice versa.

Leach in fact acknowledges this when he says: 'Esteem is a cultural product. What is admired in one society may be deplored in another' (1964: 10). Since, for Leach, power and esteem are defined by the conceptual social structure which is culturally expressed in ritual action, power and esteem are dependent upon ritual action for their existence. That being so, it follows that the instrumental action for power is parasitic upon the meaningfulness of ritual action. The 'cultural form' which is expressed in ritual action and which Leach claims to be independent of social action is reduced to what he calls an 'aesthetic frill' (*ibid.*: 12). Leach claims these frills to be the primary data of social anthropology, but in his analysis of instrumental action he fails to account for them or to explain how they are expressed in ritual action. In reducing the social structure and ritual action to means for obtaining power, he reduces all social action to a form of instrumental action, a form of action which is dependent upon ritual action for its existence.

Attempts to Solve the Problem

Several social scientists have acknowledged this problem and proposed solutions. Bourdieu (1977), for one, tries to avoid it by introducing the notion of 'habitus', understood as a generative principle of thought and action, which itself is practically constituted and embodied as habitual ways of acting. As constitutive of thought and action, habitus is foundational of our social reality, and Bourdieu is able to account for the dual social constitution and structural constraints on choice of action. However, as a practical phenomenon, habitus itself is a form of action, and the question arises of how Bourdieu conceives of it as a form of action. He claims that 'practice never ceases to conform to economic calculation even when it gives every appearance of disinterestedness...' (1977: 177). Due to the all-pervasive economic character of practice, Bourdieu recommends that we 'extend economic calculation to all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation...' (*ibid.*: 178). That all practice and calculations are of an interested and economic kind can only mean that habitus itself must be regarded as falling within this category. Inasmuch as economic calculation and practice must mean the kind of thinking and action aimed at social or material advancement in the most expedient way possible, this form of calculation and practice falls within the scope of instrumentality. Habitus itself is therefore conceived of in instrumental terms by Bourdieu. Habitus, which was introduced in order to solve the problem of the social constitution of instrumental action, is thus itself a form of instrumental action, and the problem we raised above remains unsolved.

Giddens (1979) also attempts to solve what he calls the most pressing problem in the social sciences, namely that of coming up with an adequate theory of action. Giddens claims that a solution to this problem is required in order to transcend the false opposition between structure and agency. However, despite his refinement of previous action theories by introducing notions such as ‘rules’ and ‘resources’, and his conceptual distinction between practical and discursive consciousness, he is unable to conceive of action in any other way than instrumental action, or of social reality as anything else than the unintended outcome of this instrumental action. That Giddens remains wedded to the same paradigm as Leach is evident from his description of what he calls the ‘duality of structure’, which is supposed to weld together the notions of structure and agency: it consists in analysing social systems both as strategic conduct and as institutions:

To examine the constitution of social systems as strategic conduct is to study the mode in which actors draw upon structural elements—rules and resources—in their social relations.... Institutional analysis, on the other hand, places an epoché upon strategic conduct, treating rules and resources as chronically reproduced features of social systems...these are not two sides of a dualism, they express a duality, the duality of structure. (1979: 80)

It is evident from this that in Giddens’ first mode of analysis, rules and resources are conceived as means to the social agent’s ends. In the second case, on the other hand, the very same rules and resources are conceived as the unintended outcome, or end, of the social agents’ interaction. Although Giddens distances himself from methodological individualism, he remains locked in the same concept of action as instrumental action and of social reality as the unintended by-product of this instrumental action, as in the earlier accounts we have investigated.

These, more modern approaches to practice, attempting to refine the conception of action proposed in the earlier versions of methodological individualism, are hence still caught up in the concept of instrumental action. We can therefore say that instrumental action still prevails as the anthropological concept of action, just as it has done since the 1950s. In order to solve the problem, it is necessary to develop a different concept of action—to try to conceive of the relationship between ends and means in human action in terms other than those of instrumentality. There are at least two sources to turn to here, the first of which I shall consider is Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (1980).

Aristotle’s Account of the Good Life as a Life of Virtuous Action

Aristotle starts his mature ethical treatise by pointing out that ‘Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good...’ (ibid.: 1). By aiming at some good, all our endeavours have an end, and

must also concern means for obtaining this end. All human endeavours are therefore goal-oriented activities entailing means–end relationships and can thus be characterized as a form of action. The question which occupies Aristotle in his ethics is what is *eudaimonia*, happiness, or the good life for humankind. According to Aristotle, the goods, or ends, we aim at in our actions are of various kinds and stand in different relationships to each other, so that some goods are subordinated to others. Because some ends are the means for further ends, the former ends are dependent upon the latter for their existence. The end we seek in happiness, however, must be the highest good. If happiness is subordinated to another end, this superior end would be more valuable and we would choose happiness for the sake of this higher end. However, we do not choose happiness for something else, but rather seek it in all our multifarious activities. Happiness is therefore not something we choose as a means towards something else, but rather something we choose for its own sake. Furthermore, if happiness was a means to a further end, it would be dependent upon this further end for its existence. This runs contrary to our intuition, since we tend to say that happiness is the superior end of life. Aristotle therefore claims that ‘Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action’ (ibid.: 12). The superior end of action, the good life, must therefore be something self-sufficient, and something we regard as an end in itself.

In order to determine this superior end and the activity consisting in pursuing it, Aristotle proceeds to enquire into the human *ergon*, or the characteristic activity for humankind.¹ According to Aristotle, for any being, that being’s good life is a life according to its characteristic activity. He finds that the *ergon*² of humankind cannot be the activity of nutrition and growth, since we have this in common with plants. Nor can it be perception, since this activity is shared by all animals. Neither of these activities can express what is specifically human. After discarding growth and perception, Aristotle says that ‘There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle...’ (ibid.: 13). The characteristic activity is a life of action which is determined by a rational principle. The rational principle of action consists in a choice based on a deliberation of what the situation calls for. In all actions there is a danger of doing too much or too little, and we must therefore avoid the two vices of excess and deficiency, and seek the mean between them. Action which is based on a deliberation of the particular circumstances of the situation, which avoids the extreme vices and hits the mean, is virtuous action. Since virtuous action is

1. I would like to thank Dr N. J. Allen for reading and commenting on a previous draft of this article. I would also like to thank Professor Wendy James, who supervised my M. Phil thesis, in which some of the arguments rehearsed here were presented for the first time. Needless to say, the author is solely accountable for any errors that may remain.

2. I choose the more modern translation of *ergon* as ‘characteristic activity’, rather than the more old fashioned ‘function’, due to the unfortunate connotations of the term ‘function’ in an anthropological context. Cf. the revision of W. D. Ross’s translation (1980: xxv–xxviii).

action determined by a rational principle, i.e. choice and deliberation, it fulfils the human *ergon*. Moreover, since a being's happiness is life according to its *ergon*, virtuous action must be an intrinsic part of human happiness. Such action, which accords with our characteristic activity, is not merely expedient, it is good in itself, and therefore an end in itself. These virtuous actions are good in themselves because they are actions according to our characteristic activity, and as such are constitutive of *eudaemonia*. Virtuous action is therefore chosen not as a means to an end, but because it is good in itself, that is, an end in itself. The good life is a life of virtuous action, but since the good life is inseparable from these actions, they are not means to happiness, but rather constitutive of happiness. Since happiness is inseparable from virtuous action, in this form of action, the end is inseparable from the means that bring it about.

Regardless of the value of Aristotle's substantial account of human virtues, what is of interest to us is that Aristotle gives a description of a form of action which is different in its means–end relationship from instrumental action. Virtuous action, *praxis*, is not a mere means to the good life: the good life consists in nothing but a life of virtuous action. The good life as an end is hence intrinsic, not extrinsic, to virtuous action. Virtuous action is therefore a form of autotelic action, a form of action which is an end in itself, in which the ends and the means are conceptually interdependent. Opposed to *praxis* is *poiesis*, production or instrumental action, where the end is separated from the means that bring it about. In *poiesis*, the maker possesses an idea, *eidōs*, of what he or she wants to make, and then proceeds to choose a means of accomplishing it, in the same way as a carpenter has an idea of the table he or she wants to make before starting to act in order to realize it. When taking the form of an end, an idea is preconceived and precedes the action, which is chosen merely for its expediency and instrumentality in accomplishing the end. Since the end precedes the action, the end is conceptually independent of the action which brings it about.

It is clear that the anthropological concept of action owes more to Aristotle's concept of *poiesis* than to his concept of *praxis*.³ Moreover, it is precisely the inability to conceive of action in terms other than those of instrumentality and expediency which creates the problems we saw characterizing methodological individualism. However, the idea of a form of action that is more fundamental than, and indeed opposed to instrumental action is not entirely absent from anthropological analysis, but is to be found in one of the foundational texts of our discipline, namely Mauss's *The Gift* of 1925 (Mauss 1990).

3. It is worth noting that some of the more modern approaches in the social sciences, such as those of Bourdieu and Giddens, have become known as 'praxis theories'. However, since these authors do not clarify what they mean by the notion of *praxis*, nor refer to Aristotle's works, and are also unable to free themselves from the paradigm of instrumental action, I am unable to understand what they mean by the notion of 'praxis' as opposed to 'action' in general. Cf. Giddens 1979, Ortner 1984.

Gift Exchange as a Form of Communicative Action

Mauss's essay on gift exchange can to a large extent be read as a reaction to Malinowski's interpretation of gift exchange in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Malinowski's aim is to challenge the prevailing idea of 'Primitive Economic Man' as a creature living in material abundance and thus having no need to develop the concepts of 'value', 'wealth', and 'exchange'. In opposition to this, Malinowski wants to show how the gift exchanges of the Trobrianders fulfil the definition of economic behaviour, as long as the concepts of value and wealth are given a sufficiently broad definition. His analysis is meant to

show how universal and strict is the idea that every social obligation or duty, though it may not on any account be evaded, has yet to be re-paid by a ceremonial gift. The function of these ceremonial re-payments is, on the surface of it, to thicken the social ties from which arise the obligation. (1922: 182)

Social relationships can thus be defined in terms of economic transactions. Malinowski's claim is that gift exchange is a form of action where social relationships, and the economic duties they entail, are utilized in order to maximize valuable objects. In the case of the *kula*, Malinowski's main example, the valuables consist of necklaces and bracelets made of shell, *vaygu'a*. Social relationships are created by participating in the exchange of gifts, but these relationships are solely means for obtaining socially defined valuable objects. In Malinowski's conception, gift exchange has as its end the obtaining of valuable objects and is therefore a way of maximizing economic behaviour. Malinowski can therefore say that 'the Kula is concerned with the exchange of wealth and utilities, and therefore is an economic institution...' (1922: 84). Since social relationships are merely means for this end, in Malinowski's conception gift exchange becomes a form of instrumental action. Malinowski's gift exchange is therefore a form of instrumental action in which social relationships take part as means to an extrinsic end, namely the maximization of valuable objects. In this respect, there is a similarity between Malinowski's interpretation of gift exchange and the dominant anthropological concept of action, in that the practice is conceived in purely instrumental terms.

Mauss acknowledges that gift exchange creates social relationships, but he does not regard these as being merely means to an extrinsic end.⁴ Gift exchange is, in his view, not a free practice which has as its aim the maximization of util-

4. When reading Mauss's essay, it is important to keep in mind that he is analysing the exchange of *dons*, not of *cadeaux*. *Le don* refers to major and significant transfers, such as a transfer of land or a divine bestowal, not the exchange of Christmas cards or boxes of chocolates, which are *cadeaux*. The exchange of *dons* is socially of a highly significant nature, where lives are literally at stake. English makes no corresponding distinction between gifts of different kinds, which can easily mislead one into thinking that Mauss's gift exchange is on a par with minor transfers of valuables.

ities, but an obligatory kind of practice. According to Mauss, the gift carries with it three obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. These three obligations follow from what he calls the 'force of the gift', which stems from the fact that the giver and the gift are intermingled, that the person and the thing are not completely separated. The gift contains a part of the person giving it, which puts the recipient under an obligation to reciprocate the gift. Since the gift and the giver are intermingled, one cannot refuse to accept a gift without also refusing to engage in social relationships, a refusal which amounts to a declaration of war. A gift must, in other words, always be received and reciprocated. Gift exchange, in which agents seem to engage freely, is actually an obligatory and compulsory practice.

The obligations to receive and reciprocate mean that the gift has the power to create social relationships. Moreover, since there must be some period of time between the initial gift and the return gift, between the service and the counter-service, the gift cannot be reciprocated immediately, and it has the ability to create social relationships lasting over time. In describing rules of generosity among the Andaman Islanders, Mauss claims:

In short, this represents an intermingling. Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are. (1990: 20)

Since gift exchange logically involves more than one agent, it is a relational phenomenon. By intermingling people, it makes social relationships possible, and we can say that gift exchange is constitutive of sociality.

However, the social relationships neither precede the exchange, as Malinowski argues, nor are they an incidental by-product of the exchange, as Leach contends, but rather intrinsic to the exchange itself. When considering classical Hindu law, Mauss says:

It is all a matter of etiquette; it is not like the market where, objectively, and for a price, one takes something. Nothing is unimportant. Contracts, alliances, the passing on of goods, the bonds created by these goods passing between those giving and receiving—this form of economic morality takes account of all this. The nature and intentions of the contracting parties, the nature of the thing given, are all indivisible. (1990: 59–60)

Mauss suggests that the nature of the agents participating in the exchange, their intentions in doing so, and the nature of the objects which are exchanged, are all indivisible. This means that the agents, their relationships, and the exchanged objects are inseparable. Two important points follow from this. First, if the agents' intentions are inseparable from the exchange, then the end of the gift exchange must be intrinsic to the exchange, and not something extrinsic, as, for instance, the maximization of wealth, as Malinowski contends. Secondly, if the

agents and their relationships are inseparable from the exchange, they cannot be means which are utilized in the exchange for the achievement of an extrinsic end—another point made by Malinowski. If these two points are put together, it follows that the intrinsic end of gift exchange is the creation of social relationships and that social relationships are conceptually interdependent with gift exchange. Sociality is thus not a means in a form of instrumental action, as Malinowski asserts, but rather an end in itself, an end which is intrinsic to the practice of gift exchange. This much is clear when Mauss says in his general conclusion:

Two groups of men who meet can only either draw apart, and, if they show mistrust towards one another or issue a challenge, fight—or they can negotiate.... Societies have progressed in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and lastly, the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, giving, receiving, and finally, giving in return. (Ibid.: 82)

The only way to create stable relationships between individuals or groups is by exchanging gifts. Relationality and sociality are hence mutually interdependent ends, which are inseparable from, and interdependent with gift exchange as a practice. As a practice where the end is inseparable from the activity, gift exchange resembles Aristotle's concept of virtuous action, where the end is immanent in the practice. If gift exchange is a form of action which has sociality as its immanent end, then Mauss's account of gift exchange exemplifies a conceptualization of sociality as a form of practice where the end is interdependent with—in the sense of partaking in—and is immanent in the means. As such, Mauss's account is devoted to the portrayal of a form of action akin to Aristotle's praxis.

At this point, it is possible to say that Mauss 'agrees' with our account in his dismissal of sociality's foundation in instrumental action and its foundation in a different form of action. Earlier I argued that instrumental action was logically secondary to this form of action, due to the fact that the conceptualization of ends, and of means in order to achieve these ends, is parasitic upon the meaningfulness of social reality. Mauss makes a similar point when he considers the evolution of more modern modes of exchange: 'On the one hand, barter has arisen through a system of presents given and reciprocated according to a time limit.... On the other hand, buying and selling arose in the same way, with the latter according to a fixed time limit, or by cash, as well as by lending' (ibid.: 36). Without taking into account the correctness or validity of Mauss's evolutionary arguments, we can say that he regards economic behaviour as derived from, and hence dependent and parasitic upon, the more fundamental gift exchange. I said earlier that economic behaviour is a form of instrumental action and that gift exchange is a different form of action. My account therefore accords with Mauss's in that instrumental action is parasitic upon a more fundamental form of action.

The question arises how sociality can be an intrinsic end of gift exchange, how social reality can be the immanent and intrinsic end of gift exchange as a form of social practice. Mauss hints at this in several places, as when he says of the Melanesian *kula* traders: 'They have an extensive economic life, going beyond the

confines of the islands and their dialects...' (ibid.: 32). Gift exchange connects not only people within one region, or even just one language, but creates relationships and alliances between people over a greater area. Gift exchange has the ability to include people and thus has a transcending and open-ended character. However, Mauss touches upon what the foundation of this open-endedness consists in when he says of Germanic law that:

all lived to a fairly large extent morally and economically outside the closed confines of the family group. Thus, it was by the form of the gift and the alliance, by pledges and hostages, by feasts and presents that were as generous as possible, that they communicated, helped, and allied themselves to one another. (Ibid.: 60)

This shows that gift exchange not only creates relationships and alliances between people, it also serves as a means of communication between people. If gift exchange is a form of communication, gifts must be a communicative medium, and the actual exchange of them must be a form of communicative action. As a form of communicative action, gift exchange has an open-ended character and serves to bring people into contact and dialogue. One can say that the gift is constitutive of sociality and of social reality, because it is expressive and communicative.

Exchange, Kinship, and the Origin of Society

The opposition between autotelic and heterotelic, or communicative and instrumental action can be illustrated by means of the writings of those anthropologists who have applied Mauss's insights to kinship theory, in order to say something about the origin of human society. Starting from the universality of the incest prohibition understood as a negative rule prohibiting marriage between close relatives, Lévi-Strauss (1969) argues that the crossing of the threshold between nature and culture, and the origin of human society, are to be located in the meeting between two men to exchange their sisters as wives. The dawn of humanity is located in the necessity to separate marriageable from unmarried women, arranged in its simplest form by two men exchanging their sisters as wives. Following a similar line of argument, Allen (1998a) argues that the logically simplest form of social organization with an actual ethnographical counterpart is the four-section system frequently reported from Australia.⁵ In this form of organization, it is not sisters who are exchanged as wives, but rather children who are exchanged between

5. Allen shows that Mauss must have had knowledge of four-section systems through his work with Durkheim on *Primitive Classification* (1963), originally printed in 1903.

generation moieties.⁶ Allen goes on to argue that the origin of society can be located in the effervescent gatherings of initiation rituals, where children are ceremonially exchanged between the generation moieties. Disregarding the question of the logical primacy of child exchange over sister exchange, the upshot of Lévi-Strauss's and Allen's arguments is that sociality is not an independent end for which the described exchanges are an expedient means. Rather, sociality is an intrinsic end of these exchanges. In Lévi-Strauss's and Allen's accounts, the exchange of sisters or children as wives is hence a form of action where the end is intrinsic to the means. Instrumental action is only possible, both logically and temporally, against the background of these sociality-constituting exchanges of children or sisters. Instrumental action is therefore parasitic upon this form of communicative action.

The arguments of Allen and Lévi-Strauss can be contrasted with those of Blau (1964). Blau argues that human society has its origin in the exchange of services between two individuals, and that higher order social forms and associations can be derived from these initial exchanges. However, in contrast to Lévi-Strauss and Allen, Blau argues that counter services are performed, and reciprocity ensured, not because the original service compels us to do this, but rather because it is in our own self-interest to do so. The origin of society is hence founded in the self-interested instrumental action of the agents. This line of reasoning reintroduces the question of how these agents are able to conceive of their self-interest and the instrumental actions needed to obtain it, prior to a social context. In other words, how can instrumental action precede communicative action?

Conclusion:

Communicative Action as the Solution to the Problem of Instrumentality

We have now considered several accounts of a form of action where the end is intrinsic, as opposed to extrinsic, to the means. Following Mauss, we can call the former communicative action and the latter instrumental action. Communicative and instrumental action, moreover, correspond to Aristotle's *praxis* and *poiesis* respectively. According to Mauss, the intrinsic end of communicative action is social reality. Being constitutive of social reality, communicative action preconditions instrumental action, or rather, instrumental action is parasitic upon communicative action. The concept of communicative action as a form of action more fundamental to, and different from, instrumental action has thus saved us from the problems raised at the beginning.

6. Mauss in fact lists both women and children, together with effervescent gatherings, such as banquets, rituals, military services, dances, festivals, and fairs, as examples of exchange between collectivities (1990: 5).

A word of warning here. To argue for the salience of a concept of action over and above that of instrumental action is not, of course, to say that instrumental action, or maximizing behaviour, is not an important part of social life, only that it is not the whole of it. Most of our actions are done for the sake of something, and hence with a clear goal in mind. However, concomitantly with choosing means to obtain some extrinsic end, we represent reality in a socially constituted way. This social constitution of reality is the intrinsic end of our action, an end which cannot be accounted for in instrumental terms. The distinction between communicative and instrumental action is therefore a conceptual distinction, and best thought of as empirically conjoined aspects of any given action.

The last point I shall consider is whether Mauss's description of gift-exchange can, in any way, have been influenced by Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. As we have seen, Mauss's account of gift-exchange corresponds to Aristotle's account of virtuous action, both being descriptions of a form of autotelic action, a form of action where the end is intrinsic to the means. We know that Mauss studied philosophy under Durkheim in Bordeaux in the late 1890s, and he himself tells us that he had a taste for it (Mauss 1998: 35). Moreover, in his 1938 essay 'A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person, the Notion of "Self"', Mauss describes the efforts of the *Année Sociologique* school thus: 'We have applied ourselves particularly to the social history of the categories of the human mind. We are trying to explain them one by one, starting quite simply and provisionally from the list of Aristotelian categories' (1975: 59). This shows that Mauss not only had knowledge of philosophy in general, but also of Aristotle's work in particular, at least his *Metaphysics*. Allen argues cogently for the fact that Mauss's overall intellectual project can be interpreted as the empirical study of the world-historical evolution of the categories of the human mind, and that the starting-point for this endeavour was the Aristotelian table of categories:

what I hope to have shown is that Aristotle's categories offer an approach to understanding not only the orientation of the Durkheimian enterprise in general but also the personal thinking of that member of the school who, at least to some of us, is the most interesting and inspiring of them all. (1998b: 48)

Mauss's scattered references to Aristotle, and Allen's convincing arguments regarding the latter's influence on the former, warrant in my view the conjecture that Mauss's account of gift exchange is influenced by, if not modelled on, Aristotle's investigation of virtuous action in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. Regardless of the justification of this conclusion, the main conclusion is that Aristotle's and Mauss's accounts are by no means outdated or exhausted, but rather contain important descriptions and conceptions which can be used to solve contemporary problems in the social sciences in general and social anthropology in particular.

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