

what does a human have that he can give away?

An Interview with Peter Sloterdijk by Sjoerd van Tuinen

German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (b. 1947) has controversially celebrated wealth and property as the source of an ethos of generosity and creativity opposed to the “miserabilistic International” that suppresses the truth of its own prosperity. Sloterdijk is best known for his debut, “Critique of Cynical Reason” (1983), and more recently for his “Spheres” trilogy (1998, 1999, 2004). Influenced first of all by the “glad tidings” of Friedrich Nietzsche, he takes as one of his leading themes the relief of guilt. In his early work, this takes the form of “kynicism”: discursive and nondiscursive performances of parrhesiastic cheekiness that function as immune strategies against omnipresent cynicism, i.e., the moralizing split between thinking and doing which puts “ressentiment” and bad conscience at the core of late capitalist culture. More recently, “thymos” or “stout-heartedness” is the basic affect by which Sloterdijk explores alternative modes of valuation and citizenship. Throughout, his aim is a philosophical “retuning” of today’s all-pervasive “dissimulation of lack,” due to which modern emancipation has degenerated into religious, political and economical routines of compensation.

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SVT: The topic of our conversation is generosity. In your recent books you have developed something like an ethics of generosity. Would you agree?

*PS: Yes, that’s true, in *Sphären III: Schäume* as well as in *Die nehmende Hand und die gebende Seite* (The taking hand and the giving side), a book that was published in French under the slightly more appropriate title of *Repenser l’impôt* (Rethinking taxation). Yes, it is one of the topics driving my work over the last few years.*

*In my view, you’re one of the last representatives of the great German tradition of philosophical anthropology, perpetuated by the likes of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen. At the same time, one could also place you within a more sociological tradition. I’m thinking here of Paris’s *College de Sociologie*, referring particularly to Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois. This is a tradition that puts more emphasis on social relations and contexts than it does on the individual or the species. In this combination of philosophical anthropology and sociology, and particularly with reference to your ethics of generosity, I think you’re following the approach Marcel Mauss developed in his classic essay on the gift. Mauss derives the social synthesis from the gift and does not fail to formulate a number of important lessons for our present times. How would you describe your relationship to Marcel Mauss and his tradition?*

I must admit that I'd love to be an affirmative Maussian. In fact, if there were something like a proper Mauss school of thought, I would count myself in. There is indeed in France now a research group of younger sociologists who are being noticed and who have funded a Marcel Mauss research center. Yet in terms of his reception, Mauss is a tragic case, insofar as he has always been exclusively read as an ethnologist rather than an ethicist. An ethicist is someone who writes anthropology for his contemporaries. In other words, he tries to remind the human being of his or her humanity by assigning certain qualities to him or her. This act is not one of innocent anthropological description, as the human being is supposed to take on these qualities through the act of description. Unfortunately, Mauss has been exclusively understood as an ethnologist, a specialist in archaic societies. His discourse on the gift has been considered as a description of so-called primitive societies, without recognition of the message that the modern world could not function without a second economy, i.e., gift circulation. It is with good reason that the modern world has been described as an age in which exchange – more precisely, money-mediated exchange – has replaced its other, older version, gift exchange. According to this interpretation, the introduction of money has led to the disappearance of the gift. The truth is, though, that only one half of the relations of exchange could be integrated into the world of money; the other half still depends on an alternative mode of circulation, one that takes place partly as forced circulation. The so-called tax or duty, the *impôt*, which people have been forced to pay since the beginning of the modern state, is in fact the continuation of the gift by other means. And this is a very interesting and never properly understood issue that requires the help of Mauss if one wants to work through the jungle of ambivalences that comes with it. Mauss is the first and only thinker to date who understood that in the gift, the principle of voluntariness does not cancel out the principle of necessity or obligation. In other words, the gift, like Christ, has a double nature, i.e., it includes both an element of voluntariness and an element of coercion. This is why I argued some time ago that, as citizens of modern political structures, we won't escape our misconception of taxation unless we regard taxes as gift instead of a citizen's debt to the state. For a decade now, I've been wandering through the desert like John the Baptist spreading this thesis. I always say: My dear friends, taxes are not debts the citizen owes

to the state but gifts he has to give to the treasury. This is the curious thing: it is an obligatory gift. One can argue about this notion as long as one likes, but my thesis is this: if we continue to take the notion of debt as our point of departure, we won't understand the essence of taxation and will also stay light years away from the great intuition Marcel Mauss developed in his book on the gift. To which I would like to add that Mauss was a socialist; we shouldn't forget that. He was a socialist who in his own way tried to think a society of generosity, which is to say a socialism without resentment. In my opinion, however, the idea of giving the left an ethical injection that would liberate it from a politics of resentment and move it to a politics of generosity remains a dream.

I wonder if today tax is the only form of the gift. I mean, if one half of the theory of ceremonial exchange has been incorporated into the money economy, where do I situate the everyday gift-giving that people do when they invite each other over for dinner or bring flowers on a date?

All this belongs to the other half. However, the enormousness of the tax process is by virtue of its sheer numerical volume certainly the central phenomenon here. Having said that, there is also a sizable charity economy. At the University of Indiana in the US, they have an institution called the Center on Philanthropy,¹ where annual statistics are compiled about the charitable activities of Americans in particular but also of other populations throughout the world. I've just seen numbers showing that in 2008 the Americans gave \$307.7 billion to charity on top of their normal fiscal obligations. Only a part of this amount is deductible. American fiscal law is rather generous here, allowing for a considerable flow of money from the tax office to philanthropic institutions. This is interesting insofar as philanthropic money tends to be intelligent money, meaning it's dedicated to a particular purpose. It doesn't flow through the treasury, where it's without dedication and purpose and thus a purely disposable quantity. Philanthropic money is usually smart money, "addressed" money, and it is probably of greater use to the community than money that reaches it through fiscal redistribution. In other words, its efficiency factor is higher in the same way that one talks about efficiency factors in heating. An open

fireplace, for instance, has probably an efficiency factor of five to ten percent. A good Norwegian cast iron stove has already got an efficiency factor of fifty percent. Floor heating gets it up to eighty per cent. This applies to money as well. The efficiency of money is dramatically lowered as soon as the state gets its hands on it, because then money doesn't work in terms of investment anymore. American civil society has this great talent of people taking care of themselves, which is something that comes out of the spirit of its founding years 200 years ago and is still very much alive.

What about, for example, the whole anti-abortion movement, then? It's sponsored according to this model, but I don't think one would necessarily call it "intelligent."

Yes, of course, there is quite a bit of ambivalence in this story as well. Yet it has to be said that this is an enviable feature of American culture. Then again, we could also take a closer look at our own situation. In Germany, for instance, there are 17,000 foundations. This is remarkable, since Germany, alongside France, is the most statist nation on earth – there's no comparison to the anarchism of the Italians or the Greeks or the southern Europeans in general. These foundations turn over significant amounts of money. Without their activities, areas such as culture, sports and health care wouldn't be able to function. This is a very broad and dispersed field no sociologist has ever looked at. They've learned their analytical categories from the classics, and there's no mention of the gift there. In this respect, Marcel Mauss remains the only beacon in the dark night of theory.

Couldn't one also refer to Durkheim to argue that a money economy can't function without basic solidarity?

True, society itself needs a collective imaginary as an institution where people can generate family metaphors among themselves. Castoriadis and others have worked in this direction. Here in Germany, it was the subject matter of the work of the forgotten yet, in my eyes, enormously important sociologist Dieter Claessens. He wrote a book in 1980, *Das Konkrete und das Abstrakte* (The concrete and the abstract), attempting a kind of sociological anthropology, starting with the question of how sizeable social

bodies can be integrated at all, particularly in a state of social evolution where a people's assembly isn't an option anymore. In other words, what happens when it's solely left to symbolic mechanisms and phantasms to generate a sense of solidarity among people. He offers an incredibly profound and precise analysis of this question. One should actually reread this book every three years to remind oneself of the theoretical inroads he was able to make even then. Today, theory seems to be in a bit of a regression regarding this question. This has also to do with the fact that today we tend to express these matters in the language of media theory and don't use his metaphors of social synthesis anymore, which were almost always metamorphoses of a family feeling. His terminology was one that tried to visualize the abstract, greater social context by using images that were close to personal experience. Obviously, there was always a danger of confusing community and society, with the fatal political consequences that manifested in the twentieth century.

I would like to ask two questions in this regard. As a theorist and anthropologist of primitive communities, Mauss mainly describes communities where ceremonial gift exchange actually works. As soon as one moves from communities to societies, it doesn't really work anymore. Hence the question: to what extent is it possible at all to redefine the idea of the gift on this new scale, and what role would the media play in this?

The second question I would like to add right away is this. Marcel Hénaff shows that whenever societies grow too large for the gift to function, a new principle of giving emerges, namely that of "charis: grâce"; i.e., the act of grace. This is a gift that no longer circulates horizontally but moves vertically and unilaterally, as it is given by a transcendental authority, be it God or the state or a despot. In essence, "charis" is an unconditional gift. It seems to me that the idea of an unconditional gift is becoming more important for our societies. If this is true, don't we need to take a fresh look at our fiscal system? Not only from the perspective of the taxpayer or "tax giver" but also in terms of analyzing the idea of an authority that administers unconditional gifts?

I am rather skeptical when it comes to the idea of an unconditional gift. I spent quite a long time looking into what Derrida had to say on this issue, and I believe that this idea is the metaphysical Trojan horse of modern sociology. One simply asks too much of the gift if one ties it to unconditionality, thus situating it firmly in the sphere of altruism. Derrida puts this in very interesting ways. He says the best gift is one about which the giver doesn't know he has made it, and therefore the taking side remains free of any obligation towards the giving side, et cetera. To me, this seems an inappropriate turn toward idealism. As I said, this is the Trojan horse of metaphysics returning to contemporary sociology through the gate of gift theory. What's wrong with the expectation of reciprocity somehow resonating in the gift? Every gift implies the structure of exchange anyway; the question is what would happen if the *relation* between gift and counter-gift were to remain completely open. We need to understand that such a return on investment would involve a return movement much more extensive than that of taking something from a shop in exchange for a banknote. In the latter case, the symmetry is synchronous; gift and counter-gift are directly linked to one another, hence the price of the good. However, there are many things that don't have a price, yet they need to be supported, need to be paid for. In these cases, a much greater return is expected but postponed into the next generation or perhaps even five generations later. Not understanding this means that one is a really sorry human being.

Do we have the ability at all to think in terms of such a bigger picture?

It was easier in the past, because some people were lucky enough to live long enough to, for instance, watch their grandchildren grow up. That is to say, they could observe how the sacrifices they had made for the sake of the children were repeated by them with regard to their children and so on. A true patriarch could use a telescope to see the fourth generation and thus get a sense that the great chain of life continued and that his expenditure had not been in vain.

The chain usually breaks with the third generation, as Thomas Mann's "Buddenbrooks" teaches us.

Yes, in the end you have a son who is only an artist, and with him comes the ruin. However, the problem of decadence today is no longer that of a Buddenbrook family. The problem of decadence today is the problem of an individual existence unable to make any biological or spiritual long-term investments. Which is why it is so interesting that there are more and more people trying to stabilize their life achievements by setting up foundations. I mentioned the 17,000 foundations we have in Germany and how essential their support has become for countless social institutions.

Right. Bill Gates's children get a bit of his fortune, enough to get by but not enough to avoid having to work. The rest is passed on not to the family dynasty but to foundations.

Indeed. Since Thomas Jefferson, there has been the strange ideology in the US, still influential among many American charity personalities, that each generation forms its own nation. This led Andrew Carnegie – who was one of the American steel industry's tough guys and, in his virulent years, not exactly a nice guy – to bequeath nothing to his children. He said every generation needed a fresh start. This is almost a quote from the famous letter Jefferson wrote in 1813 to his former son-in-law, John W. Eppes, where he says we have to regard each generation as a different and independent nation with the right to bind itself by certain laws but not to bind the following generation – that's going to be its own business. It's a very interesting approach, an interesting ideology. Go back to start! Just like Monopoly.

Yet in Monopoly, one gets a big unconditional gift off the anonymous bank. How could this whole idea of gifts be mediated today? Foundations are important, of course, but what else?

I think the bottom line is to make taxation intelligent. That's the point, really. We're living in a taxation culture that is no longer adequate to the state of our collective consciousness. Most people know better than the

minister of finance what they'd want to spend their money on. In addition, the state has become an enormous junkie, thanks to its addiction to fiscal processes. In Germany, we've got five million employees working in public services. The state is the largest employer, and it obviously takes care of its own when it comes to redistribution. It's an incredible dissipation machine, a gigantic self-service machine, an apparatus of monstrous proportions transforming potentially intelligent money into stupid, silly money. Smart tax management would do a lot. If citizens were allowed to invest a part of their general tax burden directly in a school, a university, a training center, a hospital or a similar public institution, we would have much less frictional loss.

From reading your work, one gets the impression that this intelligence would require a very different value system as well. You already spoke of spiritual investments: if I transfer my money directly to the university, I make an investment in intelligence, in something spiritual that's different from the day-to-day economy of consumption.

That's right; it would imply a radically changed communal consciousness. This is hard to achieve today, as we're practicing a form of mass culture that destroys such a consciousness through vulgarization and egoism propaganda on a daily basis. There's probably no way around this in consumer societies. Today, the individual is first and foremost a consumer, not a citizen. We're only indirect members of the polity when we fulfill our duties of consumption, and that's why the most subversive people today are anti-consumerists. They're not very popular, though. We just had proof of this in Germany. The Green party suggested introducing a vegetarian day in Germany's public cafeterias, which almost led to their ejection from the Bundestag. They lost a lot of votes in the parliamentary elections, not least because they were accused of dictatorially interfering with people's way of life – a pretty absurd reproach if you ask me.

In your understanding, what sort of values should be encouraged or developed in order to facilitate a transformation?

In my opinion, modern ethics is too erotic and not thymotic enough. This is my basic standpoint regarding this topic. Unfortunately, we have transformed the human being into a *zoon eroticon*. This is the way we define it. We've learned from Plato that Eros is a demigod who only helps people who lack something, who are hunting for an object of lack. A thymotic ethics, on the other hand, would take a different question as its point of departure: what does a human being have that he can give away? The erotic economy is not just driven by money but by lack. It works through lack and fictions thereof. If there is no lack, it invents it in order to go on. The thymotic economy describes human beings as creatures who want to give instead of take. Thymotic economies understand the human as someone with a deep propensity to give; this is something one can observe in children, who are just as happy giving presents as they are receiving them. Parents can experience this very touching fact if they pay enough attention to their children's early moral operations.

What would a thymotic economy look like? Let's take a concrete example: art. It seems to me that avant-garde artists are real thymoticians. They accept a very basic life in order to make a meaningful gesture, a gift that could not be derived from a lack-driven, erotic economy. However, in times of austerity, the state is cutting back on subsidies for art. The Dutch liberal-conservative government has cut its art budget by almost fifty percent. The message is: as an artist, you have to somehow make it on the market. What about that? What does a thymotically inspired artist have to do today? How could he or she survive in the market?

It's very simple advice, isn't it? You have to be successful! I think this new Dutch version of cultural policy is the result of misconceptions. I'm not exactly sure what the considerations were that led to the budget cuts. It could be that they were paying homage to the neoliberal ideology, according to which culture is mere luxury anyway. Yet the problem here is partly the inability of artists to present themselves as part of the social base. Perhaps they have indeed behaved a bit like luxury creatures in an artificial compound, making it easy for the austerity politicians to believe this is all dispensable luxury. One should remember the wonderful book by Simon

Schama about seventeenth-century Dutch culture, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, which describes a dilemma comparable to that of today's thymotic artists in Holland. Holland was the first country in the world without a properly poor population. What did they do? The preachers ascended the pulpit and tried to frighten the rich by telling them that a wealthy life as such is a road to perdition.

In contrast, Weber's classical thesis was that worldly economic success is a harbinger of a good afterlife.

Well, I've never bought into Weber's thesis, because the money economy works quite differently from how he describes it. Besides, the connection between Protestantism and capitalism is not as close as he presents it. The early manufacturers in Flanders and the northern Italian cities already had a functioning money economy *before* the Reformation. And the inclination to get into debt was just as strong during and after the Reformation in Catholic countries as it was elsewhere. Spain, for instance, had to declare bankruptcy thrice under Philip II, and in the 1990s, almost half of its budget went into servicing its debt. Incredible, isn't it? So there are obviously certain historical constants. Yet with the Dutch, there's a subconscious feeling of guilt that takes hold of them as soon as too much luxury is consumed or, more importantly, produced. And art, of course, is the archetype of luxury production.

Nonetheless, artists in Holland were particularly active in their struggle against austerity policies, arguing that artists create different values; for instance, beauty. They also said: As artists, we're able to animate or reanimate different forms of community. Yet the argument didn't catch on.

They'd have had to prove it, wouldn't they?

Does such proof necessarily have to come from the market?

We've never had a successful general strike by artists or brain workers. That would be quite interesting: what would happen if the intellectuals, the artists

and the creative class of a major country went on strike and refused to animate anything? There'd only be journalists left: journalists and the police. And then we'd see how they got along on their own. That would be an interesting social experiment. We should at least once imagine, or perhaps even arrange, a general strike by brain workers in order to affirm my basic assumption that the symbolic air we breathe every day comes out of the creative class's symbolic production, and if it were neglected for just a few days, we'd find ourselves in the same situation as the mutants on Mars in Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall*. The entire atmosphere would be gone. After all, the symbolic atmosphere of society is one of its basic functions; this is something that should be emphasized in the Dutch discussion. For the rest, I can't really judge whether or not the budget cuts are sensible.

If I understand you correctly, you're suggesting that artists should strive for a culture of gift-giving. Without value creation, there is no atmosphere. You once said that intellectuals and artists were the last remaining proletarians: we're the only ones who still don't have free weekends and 9-to-5 workdays. However, when you talk about a general strike, you're not really talking about a labor movement. You're not advocating the emancipation of intellectuals. You're suggesting a movement of entrepreneurs. Now, the entrepreneurs you're referring to may not be the artists but rather those who are able to transfer their profits to foundations supporting the arts.

If I'm referring to a movement of entrepreneurs, I actually do mean the entire creative class; artists are a part of it but perhaps not the most important one anymore.

This is the leitmotif of austerity policy: artists should become entrepreneurs.

Because actually, our definition of the worker today is much closer to entrepreneurship than it is to the old image of the employee who goes to the factory in the morning and comes back home in the evening. This type of worker loomed large throughout the first half of the twentieth century but is now quickly disappearing. In Germany's new collective bargaining

law, the distinction between employee and worker has been abolished. Which is why I've recently suggested a minute of silence in the senate in honor of the lost working class.

Let's come back to the question of non-monetary value. Take Greece, for instance. In the European discussion of the debt crisis, besides the financial questions, there are strong theological overtones. For instance, one could ask: do we have to get everything back from the Greeks, or should we be more forgiving and relieve them of their debt? Are there perhaps theological values as well that could make a difference here?

Yes, there is a theology that applies to the situation the Greeks are in. Once there was a small population on an island somewhere in the Greek archipelago, which was defeated by the Athenians. When the Athenian delegation arrived on the island, the local people said: You live under the rule of the gods of wealth and power. We, however, live under the rule of the gods of deprivation and poverty, who'll protect us and prevent us from paying the tribute you're demanding. In other words, they developed a spontaneous allegorical theology on the spot, by saying: Our lack trumps your wealth, because we'll use it as a weapon against your tributary demands. In other words, you can't take from empty hands, even if you're much wealthier and more powerful than we are. This demonstrates how even 2,500 years ago, the Greeks were smart enough to use the sword of poverty against their own big heads.

But why didn't the wealthy and the powerful relieve them of their debt?

I don't know how the story ends. They simply lost interest in the poor devils.

I was actually thinking of Nietzsche's thesis in the second part of "On the Genealogy of Morals" that every powerful man, every gentleman, ruins himself by means of his own generosity.

Right. Norbert Elias, following Montesquieu, developed the same thesis in his studies of court society. Montesquieu was the first to describe a system of wealth rotation in France, where great houses rise and fall by the workings of a mechanism that Norbert Elias described very well in terms of prestige-rational behavior. Prestige-rational behavior implies the necessity of conspicuous extravagance as a show of – in Darwinian terms – fitness, which inevitably leads to an economy of exhaustion.

A potlatch.

That's Montesquieu's basic assumption, and also that of Norbert Elias in his book on the court society. Members of prestige-rational cultures act reasonably within the structure of their system by engaging in what Thorstein Veblen called conspicuous consumption, but they pay the price of obligatory self-ruin. Shakespeare has dealt with this issue as well. In *Timon of Athens*, he paints the picture of an aristocrat who's driven by his own generosity to give away his entire fortune. Then, when his moment of need arrives, he discovers there's no such thing as reciprocity, which leads to an outbreak of misanthropy in him. In other words, he discovers an enormous hatred for other people deep inside himself as he realizes there are no reciprocal relationships in Athens anymore. He was the only generous person; all the others excused themselves when he came to them – didn't have the money or had a funeral to pay for or were sick and so on. In other words, he was living in a society without counter-gifts. It's fantastic to read how Shakespeare presents Timon cursing the entire city. It's a long monologue in front of the city wall; he actually addresses it, saying: Don't protect this rotten city anymore; the sons should beat out their fathers' brains, and so on. He invokes a perverse world, because in fact it is already here. It's a fantastic story about a generous man's disappointed expectations of reciprocity.

Yet a thymotic economy isn't built on the principle of reciprocity either. There are always those who give and those who take and thus a certain hierarchy and aristocracy.

Indeed, there are two kinds of thymotic giving. There's an inter-aristocratic communication premised naturally on reciprocity. This is also Aristotle's basic assumption in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he speaks of *megalopsychia*, meaning the generous, magnanimous constitution that, according to him, represents the condition of democracy, because he still believes in the city as a place where several kinds of noblesse compete with one another. We have the competition of the athletes, the competition of poets, the competition of the sponsors, the competition of the organizers of the games and the Dionysia. And there is the euergetic gift. Birger Priddat, a sociologist at Witten/Herdecke University, just published a beautiful article on the justification of wealth in the ancient and modern world that shows that the real justification of wealth in antiquity could only be found in the euergetic function. Euergetism is something that began with the Greeks and was continued by the Romans. Those who were rich had, for instance, to finance the games – the emperor was bound to put on big shows in the Circus Maximus several times a year, including the distribution of bread and wine and so on. Paul Veyne, in his book *Bread and Circuses*, describes the transformation of euergetism into Christian “good deeds.” That is to say that in the ancient world, the justification of wealth was a generous act that could not, of course, be repaid but instead was translated into expressions of gratitude, of adoration and applause. And no more is needed in such a system, as inequality will continue to exist; the rich man passes on a good part of his wealth and is thus able to indirectly justify himself.

And of course there is another dimension as well: the inter-aristocratic transaction, where the rich give each other flowers. The Middle Ages had the tradition of state gifts. On the occasion of a state visit, you always had to bring a sack or a suitcase full of gold, because you couldn't present yourself to a fellow ruler empty-handed. We see this in historical movies, of costume dramas: whenever a king visits another king, a small gang of servants carrying a chest full of gold always comes with him. Once a French or English king supposedly brought two kilos of pepper on a visit to a neighboring king. At the time, that was in fact the real gold – black gold.

We've talked about artists, theology, aristocrats – what about philosophy? One of my favorite concepts in your work is the notion of

linguistic relief, which emerges early on in your writings, in the book of lectures “Zur Welt kommen – zur Sprache kommen.” There, you speak of a “breath of relief,” meaning an act of linguistic value creation, a symbolic injection into the public climate. And in “Über die Verbesserung der guten Nachricht” (On the improvement of good news), you actually suggest that good news depends on linguistic self-celebration. I believe a good description of your philosophy has to include linguistic generosity, or “megalopsychia.” In the past, the Sophists have been described as those who are paid for their wisdom. You trade in knowledge and receive monetary compensation as a result of the great success of your books. Yet with regard to the thymotic element in your work, the medium of language is absolutely essential. The notion of “Freispruch” is interesting in this context as it also the German word for acquittal of guilt or debt. Could this notion be interpreted in moral terms as well?

It implies something else too, something that's related to the notion of *parrhesia*, which Michel Foucault talked about a lot in his later work. Men of antiquity entertained a sort of athletic, sportive notion of communication, driven by the idea that a human being is freest when communicating without second thoughts.

When communicating “sans réserve,” to use Derrida's expression.

Exactly. And one doesn't hold back one's actual opinions when dealing with someone supposedly stronger, either. The most famous ancient *parrhesia* phrase is Diogenes of Sinope telling Alexander the Great, “Get out of my sun!” This is one component of the linguistic release you mentioned, the other one, of course, being the successful repudiation of guilt or the chronic suspicion thereof. Yet the basic attitude resonating in my writing is that of a feast I'm inviting my readers to, so I have to make sure there are interesting things on the table. I feel the obligation of a host vis-à-vis a guest who's visiting my book. I want my guests to take something home without burdening them too much. That's what I want to achieve.

What is the value of wisdom?

The value of wisdom is a self-multiplying quantity. It's a little bit like what Lacan has to say about love: you only get it by passing it on. One only has it as long as there's someone to give it to; it can't be owned.

What sort of countergift does it imply?

Well, actually, the act is self-rewarding. We know this from Goethe, from his famous poem "The Singer." The singer rewards himself by listening to his own song. Obviously, the case of the Three Tenors was different: they became millionaires on top of it. They made \$100 million from one gala concert. All that money for a few high notes! Yet at the same time, if a singer is really good, you get the feeling they'd do it for free, because it's a self-rewarding performance.

What about beauty, then?

Beauty is a slightly different matter. One doesn't possess beauty; one can't even see it at all. In the natural order of things, a beautiful human being knows of his or her looks only through other people's reactions. Mirrors are a relatively new phenomenon. I think one of modernity's great delusions is the belief that our ancestors knew as much as we do about their appearance. We're surrounded by a system of mirrors, to which one has to add the infernal machine of photography. In the past, most people were only able to look out of their faces, not back into them. They were told by other people's reactions what they looked like.

Of course, beauty is also a question of charisma.

Of course; this is how it's given away constantly, and when you observe it in someone else, you can turn toward it. You feel this attraction, the platonic effect – Plato explained it in terms of *anamnesis*, but one could explain it differently as well. Anyway, this is why beauty is always relational. Our sense of beauty is perhaps the strongest self-rewarding element there is, alongside the practice of intelligent or skillful tasks, i.e., the practice of art. Art is also immediately self-rewarding. One shouldn't forget that the Europeans emerged out of the practice of craftsmanship. Today's intellectuals have

forgotten that our ancestors were craftsmen, not a bunch of Leonardo da Vincis. Richard Sennett wrote a book on craftsmanship a few years ago in which he discusses the interesting fact that acquiring the skills of a proper craftsman of any kind requires 10,000 hours of training. Learning an instrument properly takes, on average, about the same time. A genius is someone who, for mysterious reasons, needs only a tenth of the time.

Does that mean craftsmanship has a thymotic component as well?

It does indeed, but it also has the quality of being self-rewarding, the aspect of training. Craftsmanship offers the experience of a positive feedback loop, allowing the simple craftsman to become a virtuoso. What's at work here is a great self-rewarding dynamic that's linked to the quality of generosity.

notes

1. The Lilly Family School of Philanthropy (<http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu>).