

# Idealized versus Real-Life Reciprocity: How to Strike the Balance?

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## 1 Introduction

While many classical social scientists such as Howard Becker, Georg Simmel and Claude Lévi-Strauss considered reciprocity to be a primordial principle pervading every social relation, both in so-called 'primitive' and in modern societies, they nonetheless refrained from providing a systematic definition thereof. Reciprocity clearly belongs to the family of 'essentially contested concepts,' together with concepts such as power, love, or time.<sup>1</sup> The first attempt at providing conceptual clarification was made by the sociologist Alvin Gouldner, who draws a distinction between reciprocity as 'a pattern of mutually contingent exchange of gratifications' and as a 'generalized moral norm.' The morally binding character of reciprocity had already been recognized in Roman times by Cicero, who said: 'There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness; (...) all men distrust one forgetful of a benefit.'<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the notion of a norm of reciprocity as an inner feeling of being morally obliged to return benefits received, which I will call 'real-life reciprocity,' Rawls develops an idealized version of reciprocity as it would take shape in a hypothetical situation in which free and equal persons make a rational assessment about the appropriate rules of justice and fairness. In this paper I will consider Rawls's notion of idealized reciprocity in the light of what sociological and anthropological theories of real-life reciprocity have to say about this concept. In the first section, I will discuss the social scientific theory on reciprocity, and make a number of conceptual distinctions. Second, I will use two illustrations of practices of reciprocity – hospitality and intergenerational relations – to demonstrate how real-life reciprocity is involved in these practices. In the third section Rawls's idealized view and the real-life view on reciprocity are compared. Finally, I attempt to strike a balance between the two concepts of reciprocity by distinguishing the different domains or 'spheres of justice,' to borrow Michael Walzer's term,<sup>3</sup> in which they can be assumed to play a role.

- 1 Walter B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series 56 (1955): 167-98.
- 2 Alvin Gouldner, 'The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement,' *American Sociological Review* 25(2) (1960): 161.
- 3 Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

## 2 Real-life reciprocity: some conceptual distinctions

There is overwhelming empirical evidence for the existence of a social norm of reciprocity.<sup>4</sup> A variety of disciplines have contributed to the body of knowledge on real-life reciprocity, from the social scientific and philosophical literature to biological studies on primate behavior.<sup>5</sup>

A central idea is that reciprocity serves the survival of social systems, both among the higher primates and among humans. As primatologist Frans de Waal has amply demonstrated, chimpanzees share and exchange food and groom one another on the basis of the principle of reciprocity; those who do not reciprocate the grooming or food-sharing will not be groomed or allowed to participate in food-sharing practices themselves, thereby diminishing their chances of survival. A primitive 'sense of fairness' appears to be involved here. For instance, when a monkey sees another monkey receiving grapes, whereas he 'only' receives cucumbers, the first monkey demonstrates his anger by bonking on the floor and shaking the bars of his cage: this is not fair!<sup>6</sup> Reciprocity also fosters group survival in human communities. As many classical anthropologists, ethnographers and sociologists have argued and empirically demonstrated,<sup>7</sup> reciprocity is an essential social mechanism because it helps to establish and maintain social stability and a shared culture.

Interestingly, reciprocity combines self-interested concerns with the requirements of social life. As Marcel Mauss already recognized, generosity and self-interest are linked in the act of gift-giving; in his words: 'Material and moral life, and exchange function (...) in a form that is both disinterested and obligatory.'<sup>8</sup> To explain this idea we need to draw on a distinction made by biologists between ultimate and proximate causes of behavior.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the proximate motivation to give a gift is often based on feelings of sympathy, love, or gratitude – 'generosity' in short –, the ultimate result of patterns of mutual gift-giving as they evolve over time is the strengthening of social ties and the emergence of a stable community. Gifts have the superb characteristic of being at the same time free and obligatory, altruistic and self-oriented, and it is this dual character of the gift that

4 Lawrence C. Becker, *Reciprocity* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

5 Aafke E. Komter, 'Gifts and Social Relations: The Mechanisms of Reciprocity,' *International Sociology* 22(1) (2007): 93-107.

6 Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009).

7 Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1991 [1923]); Georg Simmel, 'Faithfulness and gratitude,' in *The sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. K. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950 [1908]), 379-96; Gouldner, 'The Norm of Reciprocity'; Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London: Tavistock, 1972).

8 Mauss, *The Gift*, 33.

9 Aafke E. Komter, 'The Evolution of Human Generosity,' *International Sociology* 25(3) (2010): 443-64.

makes it such an excellent means to overcome the insecurity inherent in any newly developing relationship.

An implicit assumption of reciprocity, which is also mentioned by Rawls, is the recognition of the other person as a fellow human being. Without this fundamental recognition no meaningful human interaction or reciprocal exchange is possible. This idea is echoed in the work of both classical and contemporary thinkers. Adam Smith, for instance, argued that internalized others serve as the basis of our moral sensitivity.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the twentieth century, George Herbert Mead argued that the 'generalized self' comprises the perspectives of significant others,<sup>11</sup> while Hannah Arendt emphasized how the plurality of other people's viewpoints in our minds is crucial for overcoming the limitations of our own judgment and narrow self-interests.<sup>12</sup> More recently, both Axel Honneth and Jürgen Habermas analyzed reciprocity as an issue of recognition, and reciprocal recognition as the basic assumption underlying social ties and solidarity.<sup>13</sup>

The extant literature offers a number of conceptual distinctions which can contribute to a better understanding of the many complexities and variations in real-life reciprocity.

## 2.1 *Some conceptual distinctions*

### 1 *Asymmetrical and 'negative' reciprocity*

While most people are inclined to consider reciprocity as a positive force fostering social cohesion and fairness, it is important to recognize that it can also be a mechanism of power and asymmetry in the relationship.<sup>14</sup> Resources for giving and receiving may be very unequally distributed among parties in an exchange relationship. Due to power differences between them, the right to be offered benefits may predominantly reside with the powerful party, whereas the duty to provide the benefits mainly befalls the less powerful party. Even in enduring exploitative relationships, characterized by an extremely unequal division of rights, duties, and resources, there is still reciprocity, albeit of a very asymmetrical kind. In the same vein, reciprocity may act as a principle of exclusion: those who give much will also receive much, whereas those who are not in the position, or willing, to give much will also receive little in return, according to the 'Matthew-principle' (a term first coined by the sociologist Robert Merton).<sup>15</sup>

10 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1759]).

11 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962 [1934]).

12 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1978).

13 Jürgen Habermas, 'Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion Concerning Stage 6,' in *The Moral Domain*, ed. T.E. Wren (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 224-51; Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

14 Gouldner, 'The Norm of Reciprocity.'

15 Aafke E. Komter, 'Reciprocity as a Principle of Exclusion: Gift Giving in the Netherlands,' *Sociology* 30(2) (1996): 299-316.

In addition to asymmetrical reciprocity, so-called ‘negative reciprocity’ deserves our attention. This type of reciprocity may involve attempts ‘to get something for nothing’<sup>16</sup> or be motivated by ‘an eye-for-an eye, a tooth-for-a-tooth.’ Negative reciprocity is not a uniquely human phenomenon, as it has also been observed among higher primates.<sup>17</sup>

Apparently, reciprocity is not morally good in and of itself: reciprocal acts do not necessarily lead to a more just or fair society.

## 2 *A continuum of reciprocity types according to the underlying motivation*

Bronislaw Malinowski, the famous anthropologist, developed the notion of a continuum of types of reciprocity depending on the nature of the social relationship in which they are embedded: from ‘generalized reciprocity,’ in which there are no clear expectations about how much and when something will be given in return, passing through tit-for-tat – equal exchange –, to ‘barter,’ where the self-interest of the parties prevails.<sup>18</sup> Different motives to engage in exchange with other human beings should therefore be distinguished, going from relatively disinterested and altruistic considerations, passing through exchange based on equivalence and the mutual return of favors, to a mainly self-interested type of exchange. Malinowski, and later also Gouldner and Sahlins,<sup>19</sup> argued that different types of social relationships are conducive to different types of motivation to reciprocate. We love to give nice gifts to those who are dear to us, but we are rather indifferent when it comes to giving to those we hardly know. Relationships between parents and children, or between close kin, are more likely to be characterized by the disinterested type of reciprocity, whereas the self-interested element tends to prevail in relationships between strangers; in-between these two extremes exchanges take place on the basis of equality and equivalence, for instance in friendship ties, or among neighbors or colleagues, e.g., taking care for each other’s pets during holidays or mutual invitations for birthday parties or dinners.

## 3 *Immediate and delayed reciprocity; direct and indirect reciprocity*

An important distinction has been made between immediate and delayed reciprocity, with a view to specifying the time period between what is given and what is returned. In many social practices reciprocity is of the delayed variety, for instance inviting people back for dinner or caring for our elderly parents. Blood donations also fall in this category: we give our blood, hoping to receive a similar gift in return when we need it ourselves. Intergenerational relations are typically characterized by delayed reciprocity: the care parents give to their young children will be returned to them when their children have become adults themselves, as

16 Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*.

17 Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); De Waal, *The Age of Empathy*.

18 Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.

19 Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*.

they are then able to provide their elderly parents with the care and help they need.

Another relevant distinction, also associated with different time intervals between gift and return gift, is the difference between direct and indirect reciprocity: 'I scratch your back and you scratch mine,' and 'I scratch your back, you scratch another person's back, and that person scratches my back again.' The latter type of reciprocity is more common in large scale and anonymous group interactions, whereas direct reciprocity is typically characteristic of regular encounters between two individuals. These two forms of reciprocity not only involve different types of motives, as we have seen, but they also imply different time spans: in direct reciprocity the delay between gift and return gift is short, whereas indirect reciprocity characteristically involves a longer period of time. Due to this longer time lag and to the less personalized and more anonymous character of indirect reciprocity, the experience of fairness will be less explicitly involved in indirect reciprocity, as compared to direct reciprocity.

#### 4 *Reciprocity: a threefold moral obligation*

The most important dimension of reciprocity is embodied in Marcel Mauss's famous statement about the three obligations underlying gift exchange: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to return the gift.<sup>20</sup> The principle of reciprocity is succinctly summarized in this threefold obligation. According to Mauss, the refusal to give, the failure to accept the gift, or the refusal to give in return, is tantamount to declaring war. The significance of Mauss's insight does not lie in the refusal of the object itself but in the fact that the bond of alliance is rejected. A perpetual cycle of exchanges comes into being, both within and between generations, as a consequence of these three obligations. Social ties and human solidarity are established, sustained, and strengthened through the reciprocity of gift exchange. The three obligations are not enforced by some external power, but are rather internalized moral duties which often take the form of gratitude. As Georg Simmel has argued, gratitude is the moral force that binds people to one another in an informal social contract.<sup>21</sup> Without the moral obligation implied in gratitude, there would be no basis for trust and enduring social relationships. A strong inner feeling of being morally obliged to return the gift is the quintessence of real-life reciprocity.

Abstract theory needs empirical substantiation and illustrations. Therefore I now turn to two empirical examples of real-life reciprocity practices, starting with hospitality.

20 Mauss, *The Gift*.

21 Simmel, 'Faithfulness and Gratitude.'

### 3 Real-life reciprocity: two practices

#### 3.1 Hospitality

Reciprocity is the general principle underlying everyday exchanges of favors such as gifts and hospitality between friends, family, and neighbors. We invite people back for dinner when they have invited us, giving them flowers or wine; we give birthday presents on a reciprocal basis; we alternate rounds of drinks; we offer help to our neighbors, who return the favor to us when we need their help, and so forth.

But how kind we are towards people with whom we are only temporarily connected? Especially in the case of an unknown guest, both the host and the guest are in a vulnerable position and the sense of fairness is not self-evident. A proper assessment of the status of an unknown visitor is complicated, to say the least, when universal norms are lacking. Well-meant gestures towards the foreign visitor are easily misunderstood. The guest is dependent on the one who offers hospitality, and is therefore at risk of paternalistic interference and, in extreme cases, of betrayal. The person offering hospitality may, in turn, have hosted someone who might consider what has been offered to him as his 'legitimate' property. The norms and rules underlying hospitality are reflected in so-called 'silent laws of hospitality',<sup>22</sup> which basically entail that recipients and givers of hospitality treat each other respectfully: as a guest you should not offend your host, acting as if you are 'at home' or refusing what is offered to you; as a host you should not offend your guest, and it is your duty to take care of him and protect him. Real symmetry and balance are only achieved when the roles are reversed at a later moment in time and in the territory of the guest. If such delayed reciprocity is not possible in the foreseeable future – which is often the case –, then the guest should return the favors done in other ways or at least openly show his gratitude.

A Dutch study on hospitality towards political refugees who were offered prolonged shelter in private homes in the Netherlands during the early 90s provided some illustrations of everyday reciprocity.<sup>23</sup> Direct reciprocity in offering hospitality to strangers in need proved to be far less self-evident than in cases of hospitality towards guests from the circle of friends and other acquaintances. Still, the importance of daily symmetry and balance was felt by both host and guest. A Serbian mother and her daughter gratefully remembered how their host gave them a chance to return the favor, when they were still quite dependent: every Friday evening he would come up to the attic where they lived, with flowers and a bottle of wine, for a dinner they would cook for him with specialties from their country of origin.

22 Julian Pitt-Rivers, 'The Stranger, the Guest and the Hostile Host: Introduction to the Study of the Laws of Hospitality,' in *Contributions to Mediterranean Sociology*, ed. J.G. Peristiany (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), 13-31.

23 Aafke E. Komter & Mirjam van Leer, 'Hospitality as a Gift Relationship: Political Refugees as Guests in the Private Sphere,' *Hospitality & Society* 2(1) (2012): 7-23.

Fairness resulting from reciprocity was not self-evident in the relationship between host and guest. Of the guests, 52,5% mentioned (very) positive experiences; 30% were neutral, and 17,5% reported negative experiences. Of the hosts, 35% reported (very) positive experiences and 55% were neutral, while 10% reported negative experiences. Some hosts with negative experiences reported that they had been unpleasantly surprised with the extra burden of having to help their guests through the asylum bureaucracy. That guests depended on their host for attention to their traumas due to their war experiences could be another heavy and unexpected responsibility. Hosts could force their guests to go to a refugee center if they felt that the guests overstayed their welcome or did not abide by the rules of the house. Guests with the least pleasant experiences reported that they felt treated as children, having to obey and seek approval all the time. Having to ask for a drink or a snack between meals, and having to announce when they wanted to go out, added to their feeling of inferiority in the situation. Male guests used to being the head of a household felt humiliated by their female hosts, who determined the rules of the house.

To conclude this case: guests in our study felt under a strong moral obligation to act according to the silent laws of hospitality, but were at the same time allowed to 'pay back' the favors at a later stage of their lives. In the meantime they made frequent attempts to restore the daily balance of reciprocity. In this real-life practice, fully accepting one another's daily presence, cultural habits and preferences, and successfully dealing with otherness and difference, could be very difficult because unequal power and asymmetrical reciprocity complicated the relationship between host and guest. Hospitality, when receiving guests-as-strangers in one's private home, is a precarious type of encounter, in which showing mutual respect and acting as equal partners in the relationship – in short a relationship characterized by fairness – is not at all self-evident.

### 3.2 *Intergenerational relationships*

Whereas generosity between generations is generally seen as being driven by purely altruistic motives and as contradicting the laws of self-interest, it is important, as a preliminary consideration, to point to the evolutionary selectivity of help and care offered to relatives. Altruism towards kin is selective, both among human and non-human animals. Indeed, we help our family and close relatives first, while friends, neighbors, and strangers only come second.<sup>24</sup> Apparently, larger evolutionary principles are at work, favoring kin and relatives above others at a greater social distance. By helping our kin first, we help preserve our genes, which shows the self-interest involved in kindness towards one's kin; as primatologist Frans de Waal says: 'Assisting kin comes close to helping oneself.'<sup>25</sup>

Despite fears to the contrary, actual family solidarity is still very solid, with substantial amounts of informal care being provided by adult children (mostly

24 Komter, 'The Evolution of Human Generosity.'

25 Frans de Waal, *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections by a Primatologist* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 317.



women) to their elderly parents.<sup>26</sup> But like in the case of the relationship between host and guest, the experience of fairness in intergenerational relationships is not self-evident. Though bonds between family members can still be solid in terms of the amounts of care and help that continue to be exchanged, family ties may be troubled or conflictive, and can be experienced as a burden. Although family care is still provided on a large scale, the motives underlying the care given to elderly parents and parents-in-law are often based on an inner sense of obligation – a kind of ‘prescribed altruism’ – rather than on feelings of affection and identification. Recipients may experience the care they receive as problematic. Their psychological well-being is not always best served when their own children are the caregivers. The latter’s care and help can be felt as a form of control, and the diminished reciprocity which ensues when the recipient is older can cause feelings of dependency. Conversely, caregivers frequently experience care as a heavy burden in terms of time and resources.

Delayed reciprocity, not direct reciprocity, is the rule in intergenerational relations, just as in the relationship between host and guest. Parents care for their offspring when they are young and dependent, and while they may receive happy smiles in return, small children do not give comparable care to their parents. As grown-ups, adult children may take on responsibility and care for their elderly parents in a gesture of delayed reciprocity, but welfare state provisions in Western and Northern Europe have taken over substantial parts of that care. In intergenerational relations abundant care flows down from parents to children, while in later stages of family life the pattern is reversed, with help and care flowing back to elderly parents. Like hosts and guests in the previous case, parents and children are strongly bound by moral norms of reciprocity, but there is also relative freedom with regard to the rules about how much and when something will be given in return.

In the real-life examples of hospitality and intergenerational relationships, reciprocity proved to be strongly driven by feelings of moral indebtedness, but in neither case was the ‘return gift’ self-evident or straightforward. In the case of hospitality complications occurred with respect to unequal power and asymmetrical reciprocity, whereas the delayed reciprocity characteristic of intergenerational relations could be troubled by care givers’ feelings of being overburdened or care recipients’ feelings of dependency. As we will see, reciprocity looks quite different in Rawls’s idealized world of justice and fairness, to which I will turn in the next section.

#### 4 Idealized versus real-life reciprocity

The concepts of justice, fairness and reciprocity are strongly related in Rawls’s theory of justice.<sup>27</sup> Prior to laying out his notion of reciprocity he makes a distinc-

26 Aafke E. Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

27 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).



tion between justice and fairness.<sup>28</sup> The context in which justice applies is more institutionalized and formalized compared with the situations in which fairness prevails. 'Fairness applies to practices where persons are cooperating with or competing against one another and which allow a choice whether or not to do so. Thus one speaks of fair games, fair trade, and fair procedures of collective bargaining.'<sup>29</sup> Justice, on the other hand, applies to practices where people do not have this choice, for instance in institutions, systems of property or forms of government which clearly specify how people should conduct themselves.

The concept of reciprocity appears to be fundamental to both justice and fairness. In line with the assumptions made in the so-called 'conjectural account' – a hypothetical situation in which free and equal persons make a rational assessment about the appropriate rules of justice and fairness –, Rawls argues that 'the question of reciprocity arises when free persons, who have no moral authority over one another and who are engaging in (...) a joint activity, are among themselves settling upon or acknowledging the rules which define it and which determine their respective shares in its benefits and burdens.'<sup>30</sup>

Rawls does not provide us with any further clues on what reciprocity entails, nor whether or how it differs from justice as such. In both cases it seems to involve the balance of rights and duties, or a distribution of benefits and burdens between two parties that has to be maintained or restored by acknowledging the principles embodied in the conjectural account. Accepting the rules of reciprocity as just and fair implies the 'duty of fair play.' Acknowledging this duty involves the recognition of another person as someone with interests and feelings similar to one's own, and this recognition '(...) must show itself (...) in the acceptance of the principles of justice and in the duty of fair play in particular cases.'<sup>31</sup>

Some of Rawls's additional assumptions give further indications about how he conceives of reciprocity. He assumes, for instance, that people are not willing to make unilateral sacrifices; instead, 'each person's willingness to contribute is contingent upon the contribution of others.'<sup>32</sup> Also, his theory suggests that rational individuals do good to others so as to ensure that other people do the same to them.<sup>33</sup> This view has been criticized as being a form of 'justice as self-interested reciprocity'<sup>34</sup> or of 'justice as mutual advantage.'<sup>35</sup>

People comply with rules of reciprocity so as to ensure that benefits and burdens are divided in an impartial way, giving to each party what he is entitled to based

28 John Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' in John Rawls, *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

29 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 209.

30 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 208.

31 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 213.

32 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 238.

33 Andrew Lister, 'Justice as Fairness and Reciprocity,' *Analyse & Kritik* 01 (2011): 93-112.

34 Allen Buchanan, 'Justice as Reciprocity versus Subject-Centered Justice,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30(3) (1995): 227-52.

35 Brian Barry, *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 3.

on previous actions undertaken voluntarily. 'A practice will strike the parties as conforming to the notion of reciprocity if none feels that, by participating in it, he or any of the others are taken advantage of or forced to give in to claims which they do not accept as legitimate. But if they are prepared to complain this implies that each has a conception of legitimate claims which he thinks it reasonable for all to acknowledge.'<sup>36</sup>

I will now compare the idealized and the real-life view on reciprocity by highlighting the following four dimensions involved in both views: (1) equality versus asymmetry; (2) rejection versus recognition of human motivation; (3) abstract time versus real-life time; and (4) rationality versus feeling morally obliged as the mental origin of reciprocity.

### 1 *Equality versus asymmetry*

Rawls's conception of justice as reciprocity departs from the idealized assumption that if persons are similarly situated with respect to freedom and equality, they would agree on the justice of principles governing the assignments of rights and duties in their common practices. Rawls assumes that persons in the conjectural account have 'roughly similar needs, interests, and capacities, or needs, interests, and capacities in various ways complementary, so that fruitful cooperation between them is possible.'<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the persons should be sufficiently equal in power to guarantee that, given normal circumstances, no party will dominate the other. In this sense, persons in the conjectural account do not have 'moral authority' over one another, a situation which is, according to Rawls, the precondition for reciprocity, as we have seen.

The equality assumption strongly differs from the real-life version of reciprocity in which asymmetry in resources and power inequality may characterize the interaction between parties. While Rawls considers slavery to be always unjust,<sup>38</sup> thereby implying that the concept of reciprocity is not applicable to this practice, the real-life concept of reciprocity allows for reciprocity even in the relationship between a slave and his master. Reciprocity can exist in relationships where the division of rights and duties, or of benefits and burdens, is extremely asymmetrical. In situations of gross power inequality or exploitation, there is still a reciprocal relationship characterized by an exchange of benefits and burdens, albeit an extremely unequal one.<sup>39</sup> Both just and unjust situations may involve reciprocity, but the reciprocities are of a different moral order. In the words of primatologist Frans de Waal: 'Reciprocity can exist without morality; there can be no morality without reciprocity.'<sup>40</sup>

36 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 208.

37 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 199-200.

38 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 219.

39 Gouldner, 'The Norm of Reciprocity,' 1960.

40 De Waal, *Good Natured*, 136.

## 2 *Rejection versus recognition of motives*

The hypothetical situation which Rawls proposes with a view to determining the principles of justice requires the parties to commit in advance to certain principles of justice which are of such a general nature that they allow for a variety of applications, while still remaining impartial. It would be a mistake, according to Rawls, to focus on the varying relative positions of particular persons, because it is the system of practices which is to be judged from a general point of view; rational and impartial judgments can be made only from such a viewpoint.

Although Rawls recognizes that there are 'other aspects to having a morality' than the acknowledgment of impartial principles applicable to all, such as shame, remorse or a desire to make amends, he does not consider them worthy of further consideration in the context of his conjectural account. Rawls is very explicit in his rejection of the motives parties may have in the context of assessments of justice. '(...) I do not want to be interpreted as assuming a general theory of human motivation (...) I am referring to their conduct and motives as they are taken for granted in cases where questions of justice ordinarily arise.'<sup>41</sup> The conjectural account does not involve a theory of human motivation because it is the acknowledgment of general principles of justice rather than the variety of human motivations that matters.

In contrast, the theory of real-life reciprocity recognizes human motivation as having a significant bearing on reciprocity. It considers reciprocity as being associated with a range of different motives, depending of the nature of the social relationship involved. The closer and more intimate the relationship, the more disinterested the motives underlying reciprocity. The moral character of reciprocity depends on the type of social relationship in which it is involved.

## 3 *Abstract time versus real-life time*

Although Rawls hints here and there at the distinction between immediate and delayed reciprocity, he uses very abstract language when speaking about the role of time. Because he considers justice principles to apply to the form and structure of practices as such, and not to any specific exchanges or transactions between parties, one has to take a general point of view to appraise a practice, disregarding its particularities. This implies that '[o]ne is required to take a reasonable long view, and to ascertain how the practice will work out when regarded as a continuing system.'<sup>42</sup> Rawls notes, when talking about fair trade between two parties, that '[i]n the long run, the initiative is expected to be shared more or less evenly between them.'<sup>43</sup>

Interestingly, Rawls seems to be aware of the consequences of time for the experience of fairness and reciprocity: the general viewpoint requires a longer time-span to enable one to make proper assessments of justice. The theory of real-life

41 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 205

42 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 197.

43 Rawls, 'Justice as Reciprocity,' 209.

reciprocity, however, has specified the nature of the role of time by making distinctions between delayed and immediate reciprocity, and direct and indirect reciprocity. Moreover, it has demonstrated that these distinctions are crucial for understanding when reciprocity still falls within the limits acceptable for experiencing fairness, and when it exceeds these limits, thereby becoming a form of power inequality. A gift, for instance, can be used as a means to keep the other party in a dependent position by not allowing him to reciprocate in sufficient amounts and within a time-period that would still be considered acceptable as instantiating reciprocity, thereby preventing the obliged party to bring the relationship back into balance.

#### 4 *Rationality versus feeling morally obliged*

One of the most striking differences between Rawls's idealized view of reciprocity, as compared to the real-life version thereof, concerns the supposed mental origin of reciprocity. Whereas Rawls emphasizes the rationality of the participants in practices of reciprocity, the social-scientific account conceives of reciprocity as, first and foremost, a moral obligation, which is a feeling rather than a rational consideration. Rawls assumes that rational individuals are aware of their own interests, realize that their own goals may conflict with those of other persons, are able to assess what a proper sacrifice in favor of the other party would entail, and are able to weigh the consequences of their potential courses of action. A difference of condition between himself and others will only be resented by a rational man if he views this difference as unjust.

Although Rawls recognized that reciprocity is a 'deep psychological fact,' presumably rooted in natural selection<sup>44</sup> – a view that suggests an emotional rather than a rational basis for reciprocity –, his theory of justice diverges from this insight by emphasizing the rational considerations on which justice assessments are based.

In contrast to idealized reciprocity as a principled commitment to 'mutual benefit from a fair baseline, an equal division of social primary goods,'<sup>45</sup> real-life reciprocity originates in the feeling of being morally obliged to return the favors received, regardless of any notion of 'reasonableness' or 'legitimacy.' Feelings of gratitude and the moral obligation implied in them are more characteristic for real-life reciprocity than rational considerations concerning mutual benefit from a fair baseline. Henry Sidgwick called this common sense morality 'gratitude universalized.'<sup>46</sup>

The very fact that giving creates a moral obligation in the recipient shows that real-life human interaction turns on moral indebtedness rather than on the freedom of autonomous persons. In the words of Schwartz, a social psychologist, participants in an exchange relationship are involved in a delicate 'debt-balance,'

44 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 433, 440.

45 Lister, 'Justice as Fairness and Reciprocity,' 96-97.

46 Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1874).

which indicates the ever shifting equilibrium between givers and recipients after each new gift.<sup>47</sup> For the reciprocal relationship to continue, Schwartz argues, the balance should never be in complete equilibrium. Temporary moral authority of one party over the other, in the sense of the latter party being indebted to the former, is the quintessence of real-life reciprocity.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has compared Rawls's idealized concept of reciprocity with a real-life perspective on reciprocity. The two perspectives appear to differ significantly as concerns the dimensions related to equality, human motivation, the temporal aspects of reciprocity and the supposed mental origin of reciprocity.

Rawls's focus is on universal compliance with the rules of justice in a 'reality' characterized by idealized conditions for making impartial justice assessments. This focus may be useful to understand the necessity of developing general and impartial rules of justice applying in the formalized context of societal, legal and governmental institutions. Equal cases deserve equal treatment, and social goods have to be distributed in ways that do not disadvantage people who, for reasons lying beyond their own responsibility and capabilities, have no independent access to these goods. In this context one has to take a detached view and abstract from particularities and variations in order to arrive at just rules.

However, in the less institutionalized surroundings of the daily interaction between human beings, where rules are more informal and leave more room for individual variation and choice, the real-life perspective on reciprocity seems to be more appropriate. Rawls delineates this sphere of life as one where fairness applies, rather than justice. The idealized concept of reciprocity is too general to capture all the complexities and variations in everyday life, let alone provide us with a straightforward explanation for the fairness people experience in a social relationship. Distinctions should be made between direct and indirect, between immediate and delayed reciprocity, and between asymmetrical and symmetrical reciprocity. Moreover, a continuum of motives underlies reciprocity, motives which depend on the nature of the social relationship involved.

The two real-life illustrations presented in this paper focused on the reciprocity involved in hospitality and in intergenerational relationships. They demonstrate, firstly, how both parties in the interaction are strongly bound by internalized norms of obligation to act according to the laws of reciprocity, while at the same time the terms of 'repaying the gift' are characterized by relative freedom. In as far as we can speak of the 'moral authority' of one party over the other, we see that strong feelings of being morally indebted to the other party can go together with considerable freedom to decide when, how and how much to reciprocate. Secondly, the illustrations reveal that the experience of fairness is not self-evi-

47 Barry Schwartz, 'The Social Psychology of the Gift,' *American Journal of Sociology* 73 (1967): 1-11.

dent, neither in the relationship between host and guest, nor in intergenerational relations. The fairness of the exchange depends on the nature of the reciprocity involved in the relationship.

While deliberately abstracting from real life in his theory of justice, Rawls has not forgotten that ‘(...) the concept of justice is embedded in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of real persons (...).’<sup>48</sup> His theory, however, cannot be fruitfully applied to real persons, because they are fundamentally different from the rational justice-seekers in his conjectural account. Whereas norms of obligation and feelings of moral indebtedness are constitutive for reciprocity in real-life encounters, equality, freedom and rationality are the basis for reciprocity in the hypothetical world of the conjectural account. Rather than being fundamentally incompatible, the idealized and the real-life perspectives on reciprocity seem to reflect different ‘spheres of justice’ applying in different domains of social life, the first requiring greater formality and universality than the second, which allows for more variation and particularities.

48 Rawls, ‘Justice as Reciprocity,’ 213.