



The value of (performative) acts

Michael LAMBEK, *University of Toronto*

In this paper I pursue arguments concerning the relation between *economic* and *ethical* value. I consider the relationship of activities to objects and (following Aristotle and Arendt) distinguish between the activities of action (doing) and production (making). Marx founded his theory of value on labor and the way it is congealed and occluded in commodities and most anthropology, whether Marxist or non-Marxist, has followed suit in the attention to objects (or objectifications). What are the consequences of adding the value of acts (especially performative acts) to the value of labor and what are the “objects” into which acts congeal? What would be a ritual theory of value?

Keywords: action, performative acts, ethics, ritual, incommensurability

With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men.

Karl Marx, *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*

This paper is something of an experiment, a wager that there is value in examining the value of acts—that is, to think about action from the perspective of value or about value from the perspective of action. I argue that ethical value is to action (doing something) as material value is to production (making something). However, the objectification and hence circulation of ethical value is not the same as the objectification and circulation of economic value.

I

Marx’s remarks point to the fact that the economic and the ethical uses of value are inextricably connected. Hence it may be no accident of English that the same word extends from speaking about having “good values” to receiving “good value” for our money; from what is most important in life and could never be exchanged to

the very basis and rate of exchange (Graeber 2001; Lambek 2008).¹ Value is both substance and relation, absolute and relative. It brings together what in Western thought have been distinguished as the material and the ideal—indeed the materialistic and the idealistic—and also perhaps the earthly and the transcendent.

What would it mean to reconnect the investigation of the value of “the world of things” to the value of “the world of men”? This requires attending to value as applied to *activities* (acts, work, and practices) and to *objects*, the distinction, say, between the value of playing the violin and the value of the particular violin that a musician is playing. Marx distinguishes value as a function of labor, hence as an expression of an activity, from value as wages or price—when that activity and its products become objectified and placed on the market as commodities. There is a transvaluation from the activity to the object (Eiss and Pedersen 2002) and an objectification of value itself. Marx also gets at the matter through his distinction between use value (activity) and exchange value (objects). Marshall Sahlins (1976) refines the idea of use value by distinguishing the semiotic values or cultural meanings that shape activities or practices from their ostensibly direct utilitarian functions. Here he conjoins the idea of the cultural mediation of human practice characteristic of American cultural anthropology, the mental mediation characteristic of Lévi-Straussian structuralism, and the critique of liberal political economy so beautifully exemplified as C. B. Macpherson’s “view of man’s essence not as a consumer of utilities but as a doer, a creator, an enjoyer of his [sic] human attributes. . . . Man is not a bundle of appetites seeking satisfaction but a bundle of conscious energies seeking to be exerted” (1973: 4–5). The nature of value shifts radically according to which of these latter two positions one takes.²

In a somewhat similar and explicitly Aristotelian vein, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) distinguishes between values internal to a practice and those external to it. Here one would distinguish the value of playing the violin for its own sake—that is, for the pleasures and challenges in drawing upon and stretching human capacities it brings—from the value of playing in order to make a living. As in Macpherson, the ethical sense of value is distinguished from the utilitarian one insofar as ends and means are conjoined in ethical value and separated in utilitarian or market value. You play the violin for the playing of it rather than simply as the means for an external end like fame or fortune. Scarcity applies only to external goods, to the object rather than the activity, as it were. Problems with this approach include how to distinguish the boundaries between one practice and another and accounting for the fact that people are engaged in multiple practices. Indeed, some practices are embedded in one another, such that the ultimate practice is the living of life (the “art of living”), under a master value that might for some people be called happiness, well-being, or simply human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) or more reflectively and perhaps chiefly for philosophers, moral perfectionism, that is, “the

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1. Questions remain whether value is in some sense a transhistorical concept or particular to an economic system (capitalism) and to what degree parsing the economic from the ethical is peculiar to speakers of English.
 2. Although Bronislaw Malinowski is famous for his utilities position I have been inspired by his account of the value of the *kula* as an activity or set of activities (1922). Compare also the important contributions in Nancy Munn (1986) and David Graeber (2001).

evaluation of a way of life, of a stance toward one's life as such rather than toward individual courses of conduct" (Cavell 2005: 120). Thus the values external to one practice could be internal to another. Moreover, human flourishing in its totality entails the exercise of judgment between competing and incommensurable practices and values—for example, the time spent enjoying the violin or one's noisy children, never mind making a living to ensure the material well-being of those children.

In comparing the value of playing the violin to that of playing with one's children there is no common measure one can apply, unlike a comparison of the cost of a new violin with that of a children's toy. The former values are incommensurable with one another, the latter commensurable (Lambek 2008). Ethics concerns itself with incommensurable values, the market with commensurable ones, or at least with what happens when one begins with a premise or goal of commensurability. When we turn activities into objects or put a price on things we expand the realm of commensurable value and, as Georg Simmel (1978) observed, transform quality into quantity. This is not to say that money renders everything commensurable or that commensurable and incommensurable values do not intersect in practice. Comparing the price of two violins is different from deciding whether to purchase one for oneself or for one's child. Commensurability (or the premise of commensurability) of value or values enables and is enabled by quantification and ranking, hence calculative reasoning. Yet as Paul Bohannan famously showed (1959), there may be distinct spheres of exchange in operation. Exchanges within a sphere are commensurable; conversions between spheres are incommensurable and incite moral anxiety. In a bracing extension and critique of Bohannan, Jane Guyer observes that people may transact with multiple scales of value. She remarks that in Atlantic Africa "quantity was a *form of quality*" (2004: 12), in a sort of reversal of the process distinguished by Simmel and one that is visible in "tournaments of value" of many kinds.

The assumption of a single sphere of exchange is the basis for the abstraction and articulation of discrete variables in many economic and other positivist social scientific models and, if you "buy" (so to speak) the assumption, commensurability can be applied to anything. But ethnography shows how rarely this is the case; money itself may be divided between distinct spheres of exchange (Shipton 1989; Hutchinson 1996; Zelizer 1994).

Here a distinction between choice and judgment becomes relevant. Insofar as objects are commensurable to one another, that is, in relation to one or more standard of value, selection among them is a matter of choice. Whether one purchases one or another kind of breakfast cereal or cell phone contract could be a matter of simple choice (albeit complicated by the fact that a number of variables may be at issue). But ethical values are incommensurable to one another; they cannot be measured along any single standard and cannot be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives or exchangeable for one another. A given act is a matter of balance between, say, justice and compassion, or responsibility to one's family and generosity to others. Achieving the balance is not a matter of simple calculation or preference but entails the exercise of judgment to fit the circumstances, according to cultivated disposition and prior commitments rather than rational choice. In sum, where choice entails selecting among commensurable alternatives or according to commensurable criteria, judgment entails the balancing of incommensurable values.

ensurable values. While choice may be more or less easy, a salient characteristic of judgment is its difficulty; wisdom is not easily taught or achieved (neither for sale nor on sale).

That said, there are many ordinary circumstances or practices in which both choice and judgment are at stake or where they appear to blur together. Whereas a paradigmatic image of choice is that of *shopping*, when we look for the best deal (or marginal gain) according to one or more commensurable values along which we can compare, as an activity shopping itself is likely to be considerably more complex.³ Hence Guyer (2004) is no doubt correct to critique “conceptual binaries,” whether those of mainstream economists or my own ideal types. Nevertheless, one can propose that what makes ethical and market models incommensurable to one another at the outset is precisely that one deals with incommensurable values, or value according to incommensurable criteria, while the other assumes commensurable value or value measured along a scale or according to criteria that produce commensurability.

One of the features of capitalist consumer culture and calculated effects of advertising is the confusion of these matters, such that complex questions of judgment are passed off as simple matters of choice, and questions of choice are aggrandized as matters of judgment. I suspect, but cannot show here, that forms of both neoliberal thought and evangelical Christianity do just this and owe their appeal to their ostensible ability to cover over deep incommensurabilities—if not outright contradictions—between market and ethical values. They respond to the sort of moral disquiet that Bohannan (1959) identified as accompanying conversions between spheres by setting strict limits in some areas (so-called family values) and denying incommensurability in others (so-called, by outsiders, fundamentalism). But obscuring or erasing distinctions between ethical and market value is likely only to increase disquiet.

II

Value is generated in human activity. For Marx this was primarily labor, but other forms of activity generate their own forms of value. I will focus on action, as a relatively distinct but complementary kind of activity and potential source of value. The separation of action from labor as two forms of activity is grounded in Aristotle’s (1976) distinction between making (*poiesis*) and doing (*praxis*) and informed by Hannah Arendt’s (1998) elaboration of the distinctiveness of action (although here not by her distinction between work and labor).⁴ Acts are activities whose primary outcomes are not products (objects) but consequences. Acts are also the subject of speech act theory where J. L. Austin’s specific point (1965) is

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3. In practice “shopping” entails judgments of many kinds, evaluating relative price in relation to various incommensurable criteria of need, taste, etcetera.
 4. Hannah Arendt distinguished work from labor in that only the former produces objects of real or lasting value, epitomized in durable *works* of art, like sculpture. Labor is ongoing, repetitive, and life-sustaining rather than object-creating. This is at once a proto-feminist insight distinguishing unrewarding labor from unalienated or rewarding work and a “high” cultural valuing of the work of art over the shoddy disposable commodity. Both Aristotle and Arendt add a further activity, namely contemplation.

how to *do* things with words rather than how to *make* things with words (the latter being the subject of the extensive literature on literary composition).

I realize that the distinction between making and doing is not always obvious (Is playing the violin a matter of *making* music or *performing* it? Are people in the various service industries or carrying out “affective labor,” making or doing?)⁵, and that I am marching ever further into the land of ideal types. In fact, making and doing can be understood as distinctive perspectives toward activities, as activities placed under, or seen in light of, different kinds of description—whether this is itself a product of structural forces, performed by the actors, or conceptualized by analysts contemplating the nature of their activities.

The description under which we respectively place certain kinds of activities is one place where I part company with what is otherwise an extremely powerful and comprehensive model of value, namely Pierre Bourdieu’s account of forms of capital (1997). Bourdieu privileges labor and identifies what he calls capital, in all its varieties, as accumulated labor. For Bourdieu scarcity is the basis of value and, when necessary, this is manufactured in the symbolic realm through what he calls “the performative magic of the power of instituting, the power to show forth and secure belief or, in a word, to impose recognition” (1997: 51) or more simply, “the alchemy of consecration” (52)—or what I am calling performative acts. For Bourdieu such social acts of recognition are always secondary to labor; to fully distinguish or privilege them “reduces social exchanges to phenomena of communication and ignores the brutal fact of universal reducibility to economics” (54). Bourdieu’s approach prioritizes scarcity, hence competition and exclusion, whereas I argue that certain acts are a different kind of activity from labor, *not* reducible to economics, but to the contrary, constitutive of ethics. Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural and social capital is not wrong, just too narrow.

By *acts*, one can mean many things. Arendt idealized acts and saw them as political interventions whose consequences are unforeseen. For Arendt acts are singular and unique, whereas I claim that most acts in social life could rather be called specific—that is, falling under a particular and culturally standardized description—and iterated. When I speak of acts in this article I refer less to political acts (or political activism), to wild or singular acts, or acts of particular heroism or historical significance (the killing of Captain Cook, for example), than to specific and ordinary acts.

Ordinary acts can be very ordinary. They include the following: calling someone by name and answering to a name, promising, apologizing, thanking, criticizing, praising, expressing condolences, declaring love or war, and so forth. As philosophers would say, these are happenings under a description or as anthropologists would say—if they ever properly considered acts, the way they considered things like kinship terms, plant taxonomies, and other nouns—they are culturally or semiotically shaped or mediated. The description can be uttered by the speaker as the explicit substance of the act (“I apologize”) or can be implied (“good morning”). Hence speakers themselves specify both that they are doing something and what it is, as acknowledged by respondents. These are what Austin (1965) called performative or illocutionary acts, that is, acts occurring under

5. Thanks to Shiho Satsuka for the point.

specified felicity conditions and that bring something conventional into being through the course of their enactment. I limit my discussion to acts in this sense. Hence, a gap in the argument is that I do not consider primarily physical acts (and hence many specifically destructive ones). Nevertheless the category remains broad; in Stanley Cavell's redaction (1976), every utterance may carry the illocutionary entailment of meaning what we say.

Austin clarified what is entailed in explicitly performative utterances and Roy Rappaport further developed the argument as he applied it to ritual (1999). At the heart of ritual are performative utterances—acts of deference, obeisance, praise, naming, blessing, baptism, sacrifice, sanctification (but also curses, insults, refusals), etcetera. Insofar as all such acts operate under a description, they are precisely not unique or singular in this respect but specific (cf. Chakrabarty 2000: 82–83), that is, of a specified kind. Yet at the same time, as Rappaport emphasizes, they conjoin this *canonical* dimension of iteration with an *indexical* dimension (who, when, where, etc.); in this sense, each act is also singular, taking place uniquely in time. Acts are consequential and categorical; either you bless your child or you do not; either you provide a Muslim funeral or you do not. They are also likely to be incommensurable to one another, if not outright contradictory. The acts of circumcising and baptizing your child cannot be fully measured against each other. Nor can the act of baptizing one child but not another. Much as Arendt argued for political acts, ritual acts are not easily retractable. Of all acts, sacrifice is perhaps the least retractable; indeed that it is central to its import (Lambek 2007). Following Rappaport's hierarchy of sanctity, sacrifice could be the most profound of ritual acts, serving as the ultimate ground of value (Lambek 2008; compare Willerslev part one of this special issue).

Arendt (1998) had profound things to say about irreversibility and Cavell gives exquisite attention to it: "Human conduct and thought are inherently vulnerable to embarrassment. I can no more take back the word I have given you and you have acted on than I can take back my touch. Each has entered our history. Apology and reparation may be entered into that history, but they are subject to acceptance, hence to rejection" (2010: 322).

Many acts serve as kinds of acknowledgment of other acts or circumstances, whether putting events under a description after the fact, such as excuses with respect to "mistakes" and "accidents" (Austin 1970) or putting circumstances under a description before the fact, as in wagers and promises. Hence they act to place events and circumstances under a particular description (*this* was a mistake on my part, *that* was an accident . . .). They form a kind of meta-action, action as text or commentary, the things people tell each other about themselves, thus, the sort of thing that interested Clifford Geertz (1973), albeit here not taken in the abstract (any Balinese cockfight) but with respect to actual persons and events.

As we move from minute and tacit acts discernable through conversational analysis (Sidnell 2010) to those acts that announce themselves with much fanfare and formality and that anthropologists (and sometimes performers) label "ritual," the question of such action becomes more acute. Thus, Maurice Bloch (1989) sees circumcision, for example, as secondary to and not really necessary for the maturation of boys. Yet I would argue that many such acts are fundamental to society or the person rather than extraneous or parasitic. Circumcision is not necessary for all human males yet it is intrinsic to the re/production of specifically

Muslim, Jewish, and (most) Malagasy males. Formalized acts of this kind are not merely representations of some prior state or action, after the fact, but are themselves socially constitutive and consequential—acts that create the facts. The gift, for example, does not merely represent social relations, it constitutes them; it *is* the social relation. In fact, insofar as ritual acts stand autonomous from the more material forms of intervention about which they speak—the warfare they promise to assist in, the damage they apologize for, the blessing they offer a child—they may be considered acts of the purest kind, accomplished immediately and completely in their saying and doing.

Acts of this general kind are necessary to—indeed constitutive of—society; indeed, they exemplify the working of society or sociality and they put what would otherwise be chaotic and ambiguous interactions and conditions under a set of descriptions such that what follows is meaningful and interpretable by means of the criteria instantiated in the act (see Lambek 2010 for the full argument). It is in this sense of instantiating criteria for the guidance and judgment of practice that performative acts intrinsically generate and carry ethical value. If culture mediates our world, letting us see the trees from the forest, the bushes from the trees, and the rosemary from the rose bush, so the illocutionary force of utterances—language as action—puts social relations and conditions under descriptions and discriminates among kinds of acts (marriage/divorce/annulment) and consequences (peace/war, something unsettled between us / something now settled). At its most basic, even to say “I know” is a performative act, “*similar to ‘I promise’ in a specific respect . . . namely, that you give others your word.*” As Cavell continues, “*this connection (this inner connection . . .) between claiming to know and making a promise . . . reveals human speech to be radically, in each uttered word, ethical. Speaking, or failing to speak, to another is as subject to responsibility, say to further response, as touching, or failing to touch, another . . .*” (2010: 320–21).

This does not imply a consistency or commensurability among all acts. Austin precisely did not anticipate a unified homogenous scheme for the doing of actions, even within a single language (1970: 203). It may well be that something akin to Bohannan’s spheres of exchange operates with respect to acts in any given social system. Certain acts are located within an encompassing liturgical order (Rappaport 1999) whereas others fall outside it and within a different sphere, such as the market, or different language game, such as science.

III

Acts generate their own forms of value. To the degree that this value becomes objectified, that is, becomes detached from the doing (just as an *end*—or product—of work becomes detached from the means, that is, from the activity of making it; or as the end and even the very means are alienated from the producer), such objectified values might have their own properties, distinct from the use value and exchange value of the products of labor or from labor itself considered as an object.

Here the questions become what kinds of value or values are the consequences of action as a specific form or forms of activity and whether and how the value generated in such activity becomes objectified. Does it manifest in material objects or get stored in money? Or are there other forms and substances through which it

is objectified? For example, can the value generated in social acts congeal and be stored in persons or relationships? In legislation and legal contracts? Or perhaps in religious forces like intentionally minded deities or impersonal qualities like Malagasy *hasina* (whose analysis by Bloch [1989] as the consequence of ritual acts exemplifies the kind of thing I am talking about)? Indeed, one could draw an analogy with the fetishization of commodities, if Marx's language were not already an analogy with the sphere of religion. Can such value circulate or be exchanged, and if so, through what means or media? Are the values generated through various kinds of incommensurable acts commensurable with one another or can they be made so?⁶ Does the objectification of the value generated in acts sometimes lend itself to commoditization or an equivalent form of standardization? I don't pretend I can fully answer these questions and I will not even attempt to address them all, but I do assert there is "value" simply in the *act* of posing them.⁷

Insofar as the mark of an illocutionary act is that it accomplishes its goal directly in the enactment, so we could say that means and ends are not distinguishable. Hence the most purely performative acts are valuable simply in, of, and for themselves. The conflation of means and ends is similar to what MacIntyre (1984) calls the goods internal to practice and for nonutilitarian philosophers a criterion of the ethical.

For Arendt, the value of an act is established only after the fact, that is, retrospectively, in historical narrative. Its value is ascertained through the kind of story into which it is placed, or its place in that story, how well it is remembered, how often repeated, etcetera. I have recounted elsewhere (1993) an event from Mayotte in which a granary collapsed on its owner, the richest man in the village, who was sleeping beneath it. During the night he cried in pain but later he put a positive spin on the event, declaring his narrow escape and rescue as signs of God's grace. Villagers concurred in recognizing his blessings. That declaration was an act and it seemed to satisfy the circumstances much better than my own assumption, informed by Evans-Pritchard, that the mishap would be declared witchcraft. Some months later, when the man's daughter died from complications following childbirth, the narrative was taken out of his hands and the events at the granary reinterpreted. It was said that he had provoked his daughter's death while he was pinned under the granary. A grown man crying like a child inverts the moral order (*mañan antambo*), an act certain to bring on disaster.⁸ The crying was thus redescribed as an act of its own and the illocutionary force or value shifted in relation to subsequent events as the narrative took on new coherence. The point is not the referential meaning of his words but the ascribed illocutionary force.

Thus if work produces objects—works—which can then be alienated and circulate apart from their producers, acts generate narratives, which too can circulate, or silences, which can settle (Das 2007). The value of the original act is

6. This kind of question is addressed by means of Louis Dumont's (1970) conceptions of hierarchy.

7. Further questions concern voice, who has the right to speak or act, and with what forcefulness. Hence, an additional analogy with Marx is the question of control over, or access to, the "means of action" and perhaps to distinguish distinct "modes of action."

8. The primary inverted act of this kind is incest.

determined by the narrative (or its absence), itself shaped by particular narrative conventions, theories of accountability, the power of certain voices, and a variety of contingent interests and circumstances. It is liable to alienation, revision, and in some instances entextualization and commoditization (in writing or film).

Conversely, specifically virtuous acts draw their value in part from the fact that (unlike the man pinned by the granary) they do not call attention to themselves. As the Malagasy proverb has it, full containers don't rattle; *feno tsy mikobaña*. Their value is found in their immediate consequences for the others to whom they are directed (and eventually for social reproduction) and as they confirm or enlarge the characters of the protagonists. They may also inspire witnesses or bystanders. Hence, among the objects generated by acts are precisely the values and dispositions we call "ethical"—hope, faith, charity, compassion, etcetera (but also resentment, cynicism, etcetera)—and ultimately the value of life itself. These culturally articulated values are themselves "valuable," stores of accumulated wisdom (or disaffection), and objectifications of value like the Malagasy proverb. Sometimes the objectified value gets alienated from the actors and the act, for example, in the case of American war amputees who are thanked by strangers for their "sacrifice" when they do not see their service or injuries in that light (Wool 2011). In redescription as sacrifice value is recirculated in a discourse of patriotism. Values of this kind of course in turn shape further actions (as explored by authors in the Boasian and Weberian traditions).

Often the value of a performative act lies simply in the transformations it effects in the persons and conditions entailed by it, an apology transforming relations with the aggrieved party, for example. Equally important are the criteria such an act puts in place and by which subsequent actions are evaluated (Lambek 2010). The value of an apology is weakened if not negated, if the person who apologized repeats his original offence; in fact, an offence after the apology takes on new weight. The value is also compromised if the felicity conditions are not all present; an apology offered too frequently, in the wrong tone of voice, or to the wrong person is weak or void. The value of various admissions of responsibility uttered in the course of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (and similar endeavors) and the public acts of forgiveness that followed them can be interpreted in this light (Ross 2010).

If an effect of the market is that any object of a certain kind or equivalent value is substitutable for any other, this is clearly not the case with respect to performative acts. My promise or apology is not substitutable for yours; I cannot stand at the altar in your stead or replace a wedding with a funeral. Nor can one place monetary value on the act of promising or apologizing, and although one can spend a lot of money on weddings or funerals, one cannot buy or sell acts of matrimony or dexiosis (farewell to the deceased).⁹ The main point here is values generated through acts are not usually mutually commensurable or quantifiable. Hence performative value is far less readily commoditized than productive value.

Perhaps the densest stores of the cumulative value of acts are what Rappaport refers to as ultimate sacred postulates, concise verbal utterances that are highly iterative, immutable, unquestionable, authoritative, and characterized by their

9. There are of course more complex issues here such as the circulation of valuables at weddings or funerals or the different applications of gifts and payments for services.

historical longevity (1999: 314). To postulations I would add certain concise and reiterated acts like forms of prostration or cutting limes or kola nuts, and objects, like relics, that are sacred in particular religious traditions. As Rappaport points out, ultimate sacred postulates are generally informationless and yet deeply meaningful. Their utterance sanctifies numerous other acts and utterances and nothing can do this in their stead. They are thus, quite literally, both invaluable and stores and transmitters of “general-purpose value” (and in this sense only, comparable to money). But in order to store and transmit value they need to be invoked. When people no longer perform the rituals, the postulates lose their sanctifying powers and hence their value; we speak of religions like that of ancient Egypt as “dead.”

I saw these issues manifest at a shrine in northwest Madagascar that houses the relics of ancestral figures of the northern Sakalava polity (Lambek 2002). People come in large numbers to pay their respects and to receive blessings in return. Highly sacred, the relics cannot be approached directly. They are housed within a series of successively more restrictive enclosures and addressed through intermediaries. The ancestors can provide children, health, prosperity, jobs, and also discern truth from falsity, forming the ground and standard for value as well as its source. But the power of the relics is contingent upon the proper actions of the supplicants and the priestly guardians, and indeed of the whole community; contingent on maintaining the shrine in good order, generating generous offerings, and especially on maintaining the prohibitions associated with the temple and the persons of the relics. Throughout the twenty-year span of my visits there has been anxiety over whether the restrictions are being maintained, the ancestors shown proper respect, and the annual purification ceremony carried out in good order: in sum, debate over the extent and fulfillment of felicitous action. As people explained, it is the acts of their subjects that maintain the power and sanctity of the royal ancestors. If the prohibitions were not maintained, the relics would lose their potency.¹⁰

In effect, to have, store, and emit value, the relics must be properly valued. Value, even that congealed as the sanctity of the ancestors, is understood here expressly as a consequence of human acts and attention. Value circulates through human activity and it rapidly evaporates in the absence of such activity. Sacred value is in a sense the objectified consequence of collective and individual acts on the part of the faithful, to whatever degree that relationship is mystified to them (Bloch 1989) and even where, as we have just seen, it is not. As alluded above, formally, the mystification of performative action is akin to Marx’s discussion of the mystification of labor in commodity fetishism. And perhaps such value can collapse in a way similar to that of a financial institution when people no longer express their faith in its value through the regular performance of acts of buying, investing, or borrowing.

The value of human acts is stored in ultimate sacred postulates, icons, deities, etcetera, and would be depleted without the continued enactment of core rituals. Prayers must be regularly recited irrespective of their objectification as scripture. Such recitations are acts and value is not frozen or spent but lived and renewed,

10. In effect, Sakalava practitioners voice the same argument in practice that ethnographers of Madagascar (Bloch 1989, Lambek 2002) elevate to the level of general theory.

used but not used up. In fact, following the logic of the gift, expending value simultaneously generates more value (Hyde 1983). More precisely, certain core rituals (e.g., Catholic mass, Muslim *swala*, Sakalava *fanompoa*) felicitously (authoritatively) performed, regenerate the value congealed in the ultimate sacred postulates, gestures, and objects—and they and other rituals circulate value insofar as they invest new persons, relationships, and circumstances with sanctity and place them under new or renewed descriptions.

Acts are also necessary for the validation or authentication of objects, drawing sometimes on the previously established character or probity (value) of the authenticator. This is true for contracts, bonds, and even national currencies, which have two sides (Hart 1986), one indicating the numerical value and the other the ethical value (so to speak), stemming from the trustworthiness of the authenticating source. This holds in different ways for luxury objects—jewels, paintings, wine, etcetera. The mark or brand adds to the monetary value of the object as the sign of acts of authentication during the design and production process. The value of objects is linked to acts of contract.¹¹

If the value of embodied acts is objectified in words, signatures, or relics, it can also be found in such artifacts as a ring or headscarf, or in embodied traces such as a scar or the smear of white clay that Sakalava supplicants receive on their faces upon paying their respects at the shrine. In nearby Mayotte the value of the act of prayer on behalf of others, its substantiality and sweetness, is objectified in the pastries that are subsequently consumed or carried home and distributed to those who were not present but whose presence is post facto interpellated, so to speak, in the further act of consuming the sweet.

IV

The pastries lead to the final means I describe for ascertaining the value of acts, namely in following the ways in which specific kinds of acts are reciprocated and their value circulated. That is to say, one can approach acts exactly along the lines laid out by Marcel Mauss (1990), namely to follow the gift. Indeed, I go further than mere analogy since it is possible to argue that where Mauss speaks of the obligations to give, accept, and return gifts, he is discussing three kinds of acts, rather than rules. In the end I conclude that in fact it is these acts that *are* the gift and that the gift qua object is merely the materialization of the acts. The material gift, in effect, is the objectification of the value generated in acts of giving and receiving (including prior acts). Hence where a commodity is an objectification of work placed on the market, a gift is an objectification of acts placed in social circulation (compare Gregory 1982; Strathern 1988).¹²

I am back in the magic land of ideal types, but I can illustrate and substantiate this argument through a small slice of ethnography from Mayotte (cf. Lambek 1990, 2000, 2011). A steady progression of rituals take place, some deemed

11. This paragraph draws on Paul Christopher Johnson's genealogical account of forensic persons (2011).

12. It is of course the case that buying, selling, lending, borrowing, and speculating are also acts, with their own relationships to objects.

necessary for the life cycle and others that are not obligatory but nonetheless frequent. All entail the recitation of Islamic text and all are embedded within reciprocity scenarios.

The reciprocity scenario in Mayotte works as follows: I invite you to recite prayers on my behalf or on behalf of my community or my children or parents and you, in turn, invite me to do the same on your behalf. For the act of praying for my kin you will receive recognition from God and also a substantial meal, pastries, and some cash from me; I will receive the equivalent for performing acts of prayer for you. Much as Erving Goffman (1981; cf. Sidnell 2009) distinguishes among the animator, author, principal, addressed and unaddressed recipients, overhearers, and eavesdroppers in a speech situation, so in these rituals one can minimally distinguish subjects (or principals), sponsors, performers/animations, addressed recipients, and witnesses.¹³

The cycle of reciprocity between sponsors and performers is articulated with a cycle of exchange between subjects and sponsors. If I sponsor rituals on behalf of my children today, after my death they will sponsor different ones on my behalf. Moreover, they can expect to sponsor the same rituals on behalf of their children that their parents have sponsored for them. Value thus circulates both within generational cohorts and between biological generations and in both of what Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) called direct and generalized forms.

As kin are obligated to sponsor events for one another, so are community members obligated to perform at one another's events. Such reciprocal acts of recitation, witness, and sponsorship are valuable in reproducing persons and social relations. I am close to what an earlier generation spoke of as function here, but by value I refer to intentional, forceful, and recognized rather than simply necessary qualities and consequences and to the exercise of human capacities (Macpherson 1973) rather than the satisfaction of appetites or needs. What I want to stress is that in a given community each person is an active participant in the well-being and transformation of every other. Sponsoring, witnessing, reciting, and subjecting oneself to be prayed over or transformed are roles that are exchanged and acts that implicate each person in the life and social being of every other. To be a complete citizen by the end of one's life is to have participated in the sponsorship of numerous rituals and to have actively performed in the rituals of others, indeed to have participated in the rituals of all those who have participated in one's own. Each person becomes who he or she is through the acknowledgment of others; as people say, "what makes a person a person is [other] persons, *maïka uluïu uluïu, uluïu.*"¹⁴

13. Recipients might include saints, spirits, ancestors, angels, as well as God. The texts themselves have long deceased authors or, with respect to the Qur'an, Mohammed as its original human channel followed by the chain of reciters from his time to the present.

14. To which Sakalava add, *maïka ampanjaka ampanjaka, vahoaka*, what makes a ruler a ruler is the people. This applies to the shrine scenario described above.

At most events men recite while women cook and distribute food.¹⁵ The labor-intensive activity of preparing, apportioning, and distributing food may be considered acts on the part of the women, partially equivalent to those of the praying men, that is, felicitously acknowledging, transforming, and regenerating value. At each major event, women of the sponsoring household prepare pastries, drawing upon the assistance of kinswomen, friends, or the entire body of village women according to the particular cycle of reciprocity at issue. Over the past three decades they have prepared pastries of three kinds—*bañkora*, balls of coconut cream and rice flour that are squeezed into boiling oil, forming tails; *makarara*, rice flour cakes that are rolled out on special wooden boards, and elaborately crinkled before frying; and *biscuits*, made with condensed milk and spices and baked.¹⁶ Huge quantities of pastries are elaborately divided according to the role and status of the participants and the nature of the occasion. At many events, performers are served tea or a full meal accompanied by platters of pastries and they are always given additional bags—containing at least one of each kind of pastry—to take home. The pastries both add force to the act of prayer—the prayers of a satisfied reciter are said to move more swiftly and surely—and objectify and further circulate the value of the event. However these objects do not last much longer than the acts of recitation.

Insofar as acts of prayer (or pastries) are exchanged for one another they are commensurable. However, they exist within a fairly narrow sphere of exchange. They can be exchanged for nothing but themselves (as Bohannan [1959] said of Tiv exchange of women).¹⁷ Toward the end of the ritual season, people become quite tired of pastries, but they continue to be produced in large quantities. At other times one could sell *biscuits*, but not those produced for or received after a prayer event and not the act (or labor) of making them for a ritual.

For several decades one of the explicit values of these events was equivalence and hence equality. The male and female *chefs de village* had the responsibility to publicly measure the raw ingredients offered at each feast of a certain kind and ensure that they were the exact equivalent of every other feast. Most salient and suspenseful was the measurement of raw rice; there were special wooden boxes for the purpose. Pastries were counted and even the salt was measured. As one person put it, you couldn't add so much as a single extra tomato to your sauce (Lambek 1990). This was established in explicit contrast to the practices among neighboring elite communities who used such events to reproduce status differences (Blanchy 2010; Breslar 1979).¹⁸ Today some rituals acts remain governed by equivalence

15. Men also collect and chop firewood, transport raw foodstuffs, slaughter animals, serve food to male guests and, at some events cook a portion of the meat (never the pastries). At some events women also recite prayers or sing and dance the text.

16. More recently they have added to the repertoire *donuh*, doughnuts.

17. The production of the cakes from raw materials and the outlay of money and labor for ritual performances could be analyzed as conversions between spheres of exchange. This is another dimension to Lévi-Strauss's opposition of the raw and the cooked!

18. Sophie Blanchy's (2010) comprehensive account of contemporary hierarchical exchange on the Grande Comore (Ngazidja) is an outstanding recent exemplification of Mauss' "society of the gift."

while others have been opened to both inflation and a more selective guest list, thereby shifting from a systemic circulation and enhancement of value toward an individualized scarcity-based exchange. As Guyer notes, the capacity to control and represent such conversions of value is highly relevant politically (2004: 39).

In the end, people in Mayotte exchange acts on behalf of one another and in recognition of others as persons like themselves. Food is valuable in itself (and its sensory qualities not without significance) but the primary value lies elsewhere, in mutual acknowledgement as kin, fellow citizens, or simply fellow human beings, and whether in witnessing a circumcision or wedding, performing a prayer for well-being or protection, or simply expressing joy.¹⁹ Such value is close to what Cavell describes as the unretractable and radically ethical nature of speaking: “What needs articulation is the sense that the root of morality is the fact of acknowledging shared human existence itself, that every utterance of the creature of speech is an exchange (if sometimes one-sided), an act of demanding a response, a confrontation that draws blood, or stops or boils or cools or heartens it” (2010: 447).

V

As specific types of acts of acknowledgment and recognition these prayer exchanges affirm the singularity, hence incommensurability, of each act and person, albeit within a larger order of acts and persons. Such recognition is a basic human end. Its consequence is what Immanuel Kant referred to as the dignity of persons and what he specifically contrasted with price.²⁰

The elaboration of ritual formalizes the acknowledgment, renders it certain, public, lasting, and effectively irreversible, and establishes criteria to be recognized by all participants and the entire community. In materializing, objectifying, and displaying the value of acts, the publicity and formality of ritual approximate the way the market objectifies the value of work, but making the consequences impossible to commoditize. One might even say that ritual *de-commoditizes* value.

The thrust of this paper has been to conjoin Marx and Mauss, not to oppose them. Comprehensive theories of value must describe whether and how the human energies exerted in both production and action are condensed and possibly occluded in their ends or objects. Above all, theory must not collude in that occlusion by reducing value to its objectified and material or functional dimension or by collapsing the value of acts into the value of productive labor. The world seems a considerably broader place than a shop floor or a shopping mall when we

19. Pierre Bourdieu makes the same point, albeit reversing the weight: “Exchange transforms the things exchanged into signs of recognition and, through the mutual recognition and the recognition of group membership which it implies, reproduces the group” (1997: 52). For an extended discussion of the materialization of recognition and its problems see Webb Keane (1997).

20. “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an *equivalent*; if it is exalted above all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a dignity” (Kant 1964, as cited by Asad 2003: 137, n. 21, italics in original).

remember there is also value in what we say and do and in the saying and doing themselves.²¹

Although Marx founded his theory of value on labor, most anthropological accounts of value, influenced no doubt by both a certain reading of *The gift* and the prevalence of commodity capitalism (as well perhaps as the Marxist distinction between use and exchange value), have focused on the value of objects. This has led to elegant comparisons of gifts and commodities in the sphere of exchange (Gregory 1982; Strathern 1988). The focus on objects is also part of a broader contemporary interest in materiality. But the new emphasis on materiality sometimes obscures the very premise of materialist theory, which has to do as much with the work of production as with products or objects. Marx noted that it was only under capitalism that work becomes commodified, that is, becomes an object rather than an activity. As Karl Polanyi (1971) subsequently argued, it may be a fictitious commodity. When labor is understood as an activity rather than always an object or a commodity, as a verb rather than a noun, as it were, the location and nature of value also shifts.²²

Similarly, I have argued that one can read Mauss to say that what circulates is less gifts qua material objects than the acts of giving and receiving. What distinguishes ritual acts from everyday speaking may include the materialization of the acts in various objectifications, including material objects and dramatic displays, but at bottom the objects are simply signs of what is being done. The objects store (or symbolize) the value of the acts rather than being fully or purely valuable in and of themselves, let alone on the market. At base, the acts in questions are ones of mutual acknowledgment (giving *and* receiving graciously)—and it is here, in acts of recognition, respect, and witness that the ground of human value is to be discovered.²³ Conversely, the core fault that Marx finds with capitalism, namely exploitation, is at base the refusal of full acknowledgment or respect, of treating persons (partially) as things, and of denying their acts as acts of full human beings, whose labor time and activity are as valuable in the final instance as those of any other human being.

In the end, the value of such acts lies in what, whom, and how they acknowledge or affirm, in acts as the means by which we acknowledge each other (or refuse to do so). At base, it is not the gift qua object that counts (though objects can have powerful meanings, high resale values, and interesting histories) but the acts of acknowledgment it signifies. It is in their materialization of acts that gifts qua

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21. Such value is not always positive or excluded from the market sphere. Stock traders are not making anything; they are doing things with money, among other things, placing bets and cashing them in. Such actions precisely refuse to recognize the dignity of others and could be said to generate artificial or counterfeit value rather than the real thing.
22. This is not to ignore the excellent literature on the anthropology of work, the dignity of labor, etcetera.
23. This holds even in such instances as the interisland *kula*, in which acts are marked by deliberate gracelessness and ostensible disdain for the value of what is exchanged (Malinowski 1922).

objects become not merely tokens of value but stores of value. The value they store is the *cumulation* of acknowledgments.

What might be critical then is not only the divide between precapitalist and capitalist social formations, but ritualized and postritualized societies, in which life transformations, rites of passage and their effects, and other forms of recognition are relatively absent, privatized, nonreciprocal, or appropriated by the state (Lambek 2013 and compare Dumont 1986).²⁴ The *value* of bureaucratic acts or legally constituted persons may not be the same as that of communal acts and ritually generated persons. Nevertheless, the divide is less sharp when the prevalence of ordinary illocutionary acts is considered and moreover there are often articulations, dependencies, and reversible shifts between ritualized and nonritualized spheres or relations.

In sum, following *both* Marx and Mauss, I link the value of objects to the value of human activities. I argue that the value of objects should be understood with reference to this more encompassing field. I add action to work (production) as a human activity. Both making and doing—at least the kinds of doing addressed here—generate value. One of the consequences would be to think of exchange not only in terms of the contrast or relationship between commoditized and noncommoditized (gift) spheres but also between ritual and legal-bureaucratic spheres of performative action. Another consequence would be to address the articulation of making and doing both in everyday life and in capitalist work environments (shop floor *and* trading floor). Following an insight of Lévi-Strauss and subsequent arguments of feminist theory, exchange cannot be disarticulated from reproduction. What underlies these activities is not simply biological need or appetites, nor simply human cognitive structures—say, in sum, “human nature”—but the expression and extension of human energies, capacities, and intentions, ethical criteria, judgment, and mutual acknowledgment—say, “the human condition.”

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the SSHRC, Canada Research Chairs Program, and Rockefeller Foundation; and to Jacqueline Solway, Ton Otto, colleagues in seminars at Johns Hopkins, UCLA, and Toronto, and the reviewers for HAU. Many of their pertinent remarks have entered the present draft while others remain as challenges for future work.

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24. What might have been the future of Communist states had they not done away with everyday and popular ritual, imposing their own objectified and bureaucratized forms?

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La valeur des actes (performatifs)

Résumé : Dans cet article, je poursuis plusieurs arguments concernant la relation entre valeur *économique* et valeur *éthique*. Je prends en considération la relation des activités aux objets et (après Aristote et Arendt) la distinction entre les activités de l'action (faire) et de la production (fabriquer). Marx a fondé sa théorie de la valeur sur le travail et la façon dont il est figé et occlus dans les biens et l'anthropologie, qu'elle soit marxiste ou non, lui a emboîté le pas dans l'attention portée aux objets (ou objectivations). Quelles sont les conséquences de l'ajout de la valeur des actes (actes performatifs notamment) à la valeur du travail, et quels sont les « objets » dans lesquels l'action se fige ? Que serait une théorie rituelle de la valeur ?

Michael LAMBEK is Professor of Anthropology and holds a Canada Research Chair at the University of Toronto. He is the author of three monographs on the western Indian Ocean, including *Knowledge and practice in Mayotte* (Toronto 1993) and *The weight of the past* (Palgrave-Macmillan 2002) and is the editor of several collections, including *Irony and illness* (with Paul Antze, Berghahn 2003), *Ordinary ethics* (Fordham 2010), and the *Companion to the anthropology of religion* (with Janice Boddy, Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming).

*Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto, Scarborough
1265 Military Trail
Toronto ON M1C 1A4
Canada
lambek@utsc.utoronto.ca*