

MESSAGES BEHIND SELF-GIFTING PRACTICES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL-ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: Using the tools of phenomenological anthropology and the means of research into everyday practices, the article discusses contemporary gift-giving practices, focusing on the special cases of gift giving, revealed through the narratives of respondents who were interviewed for the research conducted in Lithuania – a country on the borders of Western, Eastern, and Northern Europe. The analyzed special cases are self-gifts – the ones purchased by the respondents and originally called “a gift to myself” by them, whereas they emphasize that it was not an ordinary purchase but certainly a gift. This phenomenon is analyzed through a deeper insight into three cases: excerpts of qualitative unstructured interviews conducted for the research and a description of the author’s personal experience. In this article, they are presented along with the comments of the author as is characteristic of the phenomenological research. The analysis seeks to reveal how the experiences with self-gifts occur, acquire meaning and place in memory, and how this affects a person’s relationship with themselves and those around them. Although the self-gifting practice sounds like a paradox, it exists in the language and everyday practices, so this analysis aims to look for a deeper message encoded behind the words of individual stories.

Keywords: exchange, gift, phenomenological anthropology, research of everyday practices, social relations

INTRODUCTION

Talking about gifts has been one of the most complex topics in the humanities since the famous essay of Marcel Mauss, first published nearly a hundred years ago. Since then many sociological, anthropological, and philosophical discourses around the gift have resulted in mind-opening theories, and this topic is still actual and surprising today, especially in light of different cultures and changing

practices. For example, popular Christmas gifts are showed as important objects in the permanent exhibition “Encounters” at the Estonian National Museum in Tartu. Popular gifts from the nineties to nowadays help to talk about the regular Estonian people and their daily lives. My study was made in the context of a culture with a close historical background – Lithuania, and it also aims to look deeper into daily practices (gifts in particular) and experiences of simple everyday life, which tend to be the most hidden and taken for granted.

I discovered the phenomenon of self-gifts by studying the gifts circulating in modern Lithuanian society. I examined how people experience and value gifts, seek to leave an impression, or, on the contrary, to ignore the obligation of gift giving by avoiding them in every way they can. Among the different experiences and approaches, I noticed a behavior characteristic of some (but not all) respondents – to give gifts to themselves, as they explained it in their own words. Such a practice was not widespread or visibly recorded in the traditional Lithuanian culture. Gift giving was quite common during family or annual holiday celebrations, but traditional presents were always given to someone else. Self-gifting is a specific modern behavior that allows us to grasp and reflect on the changes in society as well as on the emerging and deepening division between the Self and the Other Self in our self-perception.

This study is integral to the extensive debate in the humanities on the topic of gift giving. Beginning with Malinowski (1922), gift exchange has been examined structurally (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Mauss 1923–1924), linguistically (Benveniste 1997; Mauss 1997), socially (Caillé 1994, 2007), economically and politically (Bourdieu 1980, 2017; Sahlins 1997). It also caught the eye of existential and phenomenological philosophy (Schutz 1962; Merleau-Ponty 1964; Jackson 1998) and its critique (Derrida 1991, 1992a, 1992b). Modern authors looked at the phenomenon of the gift as a tool for a broader understanding of social, religious, and creative life (Godbout & Caillé 2000; Marion 2002, 2011; Hyde 2012; Pyyhtinen 2016).

In theory, the notion of a self-gift is a complicated one. According to the classical structure revealed by Mauss, gift giving always involves the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. Yet, Sylvain Dzimira together with Alain Caillé in the famous *Revue du MAUSS* divided all the theorists debating about the gift into four groups (Dzimira 2006). The first one involves the economic concept of gift exchange, based on material, pragmatic interests, such as in the works of Franz Boas or Pierre Bourdieu. The second group could be called “the inexistentialists”, such as Marcel Gauchet or Jacques Derrida, who prove that the gift itself is impossible, or only recognizes the existence of giving in very limited regions or time periods (Caillé 2021: 59). For example, in Derrida’s deconstruction, a gift ceases to exist as soon as it is given (Derrida 1991: 27).

The third group deals with theories describing the complexity of the gift that always links to something else, as revealed by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The fourth group gathers the concept similar to the opinion of the members of the *Revue du MAUSS*, where the gift can fulfill various functions (economic, social, political, and more), but it may not be reduced to anything else than the gift itself. This might be perceived as a moral middle or a sign uniting different oppositions: between war and peace, life and death, interest and indifference, and so on.

In my study, I chose to start from a phenomenological standpoint, demanding to abandon all preliminary attitudes and beliefs. I chose to lean on the language, or the Saussurean *langage*, to be precise, as the self-gifts appear in the use of the vocabulary. So, the analyzed self-gift is a situation described in the words of respondents when the purchased item is named as a gift and allocated that precise meaning of a gift, not a common thing. This concept includes handicrafts and goods as well as non-material goods like services that a person purchases or acquires to give them as a gift to himself/herself, and it is different from ordinary purchases. I take the usage of a language as an anthropological fact without questioning it – if it exists in the language, it is true. And if it contradicts what the “gift” is meant to be from a theoretical point of view, then we really need to take a more attentive look at this phenomenon to understand it.

A self-gift as a special occasion to acquire an expensive object could be seen as typical of post-socialist countries where things were not available for many years; however, I can see such manner of vocabulary use also in other cultures and languages. For example, in contemporary sociology and anthropology, “gifts to oneself” or “self-gifting” are also examined in the context of marketing theories (Pusaksrikit & Kang 2016; Howland 2010; Luomala & Laaksonen 1999; Mick & DeMoss 1990; Sherry & McGrath & Levy 1995; Park 2018). In communication, anthropology has acquired an applied mission to help understand customer behavior and design an attractive offer. In psychology the “self-gratifier” is seen as a way to compensate the deprivation of recognition from others and to survive in a non-intimate community (Schwartz 1967).

Marketing communication uses self-gifts to grab consumers’ attention and encourage them to buy by conveying a message about self-rewarding or the therapeutic effect of the provided comfort (Weisfeld-Spolter & Rippé & Gould 2015). The complex of an individual’s thoughts and feelings, which determines the decision making – the purchasing of an item (gift giving) – is essential for the marketing interests.

The motive behind my research is slightly different. Marketing specialists have tried to design or reinforce the phenomenon of self-gifting to manipulate consumer behavior; I, on the other hand, view it in my research as an experiential and expressive behavior and do not seek to change it. I was interested in

cultural nuances and personal experiences – structurally identical but unique in terms of meaning – that remain a bit further from the picture of theoretically generalized phenomenon of gift giving. The personal factor of the experience of gift giving has not yet been touched upon in the works of Lithuanian ethnologists and anthropologists. Only traditional gift-giving customs have been studied, yet in a completely different aspect – by describing and categorizing them, and by stating the practices of gift giving or donation as a historical fact.

From the researcher's perspective we can understand how phenomena work only in the conditions in which they exist as human experience – “here and now”, through the practices and impressions of the living people. Therefore, the goal of my research is to listen carefully to individual stories and see how things that are happening take place and what exactly is being experienced. Viewing gift giving as a daily practice, I look for what gifts provide. How does the experience of this event occur? How is it given meaning and how this meaning changes in the face of time and new actions? It was also important for me to grasp the observed dual relationship that the self-gifting people have with themselves and the surrounding world.

METHODOLOGY

The study began with qualitative unstructured interviews with various respondents and descriptions of my own experiences. More than 40 interviews were carried out about the topic with over 40 hours of registered records and stenography. The main remarks and repeatedly mentioned attitudes (such as the preference either to give or to receive gifts, the practice of giving gifts to oneself or to ask for charity donations to someone else instead of a gift, and more) were then formed as a questionnaire for a quantitative study – a representative opinion survey with 1,013 respondents from all over Lithuania (aged between 18 and 75, including all demographic layers). The survey was conducted in January 2021.

In this article I selected three typical situations from the qualitative part of the research – the excerpts from the interviews to expand a deeper analysis. The three cases (two women and one man) are different but characterized by the intensity of experience: (1) childhood memory about the first gift to oneself and the following feeling of hesitation and guilt; (2) a guaranteed and unquestionable self-gift, when, even after the failure of the first idea, it is still fulfilled; and (3) a self-gift bought on a trip and taken home. These interviews and the experiences described are stored in my personal archive. At the request of the respondents, their names have been changed, only their age and gender are indicated.

The chosen methodological basis is an anthropological study of everyday practices, as a branch of ethnography and anthropology, designed to understand how the experiences that we encounter take place. Therefore, the focus of the study is on the totality of the experience, which goes beyond the text as a part of the phenomenological description.

This method of including sensitive daily and personal practices, inseparable from the researcher's participation, has been used by Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard (Certeau 1990; Certeau & Giard & Mayol 1998: 149–155). Elizabeth Behnke (2010) and also some other authors apply personal experience, which is preferred in a phenomenological study, in their works. The use of phenomenological philosophy to analyze personal experiences and stories is especially significant in the whole scope of writings by Alphonso Lingis (2001) and Algis Mickunas (Mickūnas & Jonkus 2014). The methods used for the research of everyday practices have been described in more detail by M. de Certeau (Certeau 1990; Certeau & Giard & Mayol 1998), Ben Highmore (2002), Éric Chauvier (2014, 2017), and, in the context of Lithuanian culture, by Giedrė Šmitienė (2000, 2014, 2017, 2018) and Jurga Jonutyte (2011, 2017).

In the course of this study, we will see how each experience is unique and personal, but at the same time characteristic of today's society. Therefore, each in-depth description can help understand the relationship processes of an individual as well as of the changing society.

CASE 1: A GIFT TO ONESELF AND A SENSE OF GUILT

This memory was aroused by the researcher's curiosity. After establishing that people give gifts to themselves and that this is a surprising, research-worthy phenomenon, I asked myself thoughtlessly "And do you give gifts to yourself?" I must admit that I do. "What is the first one that comes to mind?" And then I remembered a schoolgirl splashing her way through the sleet and the slushy Old Town of Vilnius, carrying a few shopping bags of knick-knacks for the upcoming Christmas.

I remember my childhood Christmas and the preparations for it differently – one year more vividly while others disappeared among the subsequent impressions. One of the most striking memories was when I was perhaps in the fifth grade, already quite independent – it happened around 1995. At that time, my sister and I, we already knew the real thing about the Santa Claus. For the first time in our lives we decided

that we would also buy gifts for parents and friends during the holidays. Therefore, for a good month, we carefully saved our daily allowance. It was a good opportunity to ask Mom for as many metal coins as possible (Mom won't let us stay without lunch at school anyways) and because of that, my sister and I would ostentatiously sing the English "Jingle Bells" every evening. That is why in our family the savings for Christmas were given the name of "Jingle Bells".

The holidays were approaching, and I had probably saved the largest amount of money I had ever had in my life. Walking around the old town, I was looking for nice little gifts for all the family members. A Nivea deodorant for dad, sparkly keychains for Mom and sister, some candy and other trinkets for my friends from school. Among all these gifts there was one item that I had my eye on, worth almost half the savings. At the UNICEF office, where they sold Christmas cards, calendars, and other souvenirs decorated with drawings from children and artists around the world, they would also sell a palm-sized foldable triple notebook with a tiny pen inside. I couldn't take my eyes off it. The whole life could fit into that pretty notebook: notes, calendar, and an alphabetically organized phone book. I wanted it so bad, but I could not give it to anyone else, I fancied it for myself. That desire overcame me, and it became a gift to myself for Christmas, secretly packed at night and put under the Christmas tree with the other presents. Of course, it was the most expensive gift from all the "Jingle Bells" savings.

That notebook was extremely dear to me, so I did not even dare to use it right away; I kept it in a drawer as a treasure for at least a couple of years. I knew that as soon as I started writing, its days would be numbered – there would be enough pages for exactly one year, as many as there are empty days in the calendar.

Finally, I was writing in the notebook very carefully, enjoying it every day. And yet, to this day, I remember a tiny little inner voice saying: how could you do this? After all, you bought yourself the most expensive gift with the daily allowance you scrounged off your mom to save for others.

Strangely, only now, reflecting on this story and already being a mother myself, I thought that the notebook was a symbolic gift from my mother, which she enjoyed with me. After all, it was not for herself that she was dispensing the coins for our piggybanks. That thought helped me. I started to feel gratitude for my mother and finally found comfort.

What does this experience show? Is it a transition from childhood (when gifts are received) to adulthood (giving gifts to children) where the narrator is still

a child and therefore finds herself in the role of both a giver and a recipient? Is it vanity, greed, and selfishness, or maybe a lack of attention that the girl of the time was trying to compensate for? Or perhaps it was a search for a connection with her mother, which was triggered by a much later exchange of roles?

The feeling that characterizes this experience is hesitation. Was the most expensive gift bought for oneself the right move or should the sense of guilt be acknowledged? Sherry and colleagues argue that self-gifts interfere with the conflicting ideals inherent in modern Western society, such as “sociability and self-denial” and “narcissism and pride in one’s accomplishments” (Sherry & McGrath & Levy 1995: 403). Teresa Heath, Caroline Tynan and Christine Ennew found a change in self-perception: “there is some immediate ‘therapeutic’ effect of self-gift giving. Most participants described feeling ‘better’ or ‘satisfied’ (Heath & Tynan & Ennew 2015: 23), but afterwards, the therapeutic effect of buying a self-gift (associated with unfavorable contexts) tends to diminish. Equally, negative emotions such as guilt tend to grow, as the individual realizes that the purchase did not really help (Heath & Tynan & Ennew 2015). This is exactly what happened to the heroine of the story with her notebook.

The anxiety and a feeling of discomfort brought back the memory of the event and raised the need to get to know something that is incomprehensible, even though that something is part of the Self. This internal conflict is a necessary condition for self-reflection. In the memory the experience splits into two Selves: the acting Self (the one who acted) and the reflecting, evaluating, judging Self (the one who sees the whole situation from a certain distance). According to Waldenfels, “the act of drawing a boundary can thus be compared to the act of making a contract, an act which does not become a part of the contract itself, yet which becomes tangible indirectly through a change in one’s responsibilities”. Here Waldenfels emphasizes that “the self-referentiality of drawing boundaries consists in its self-withdrawal” (Waldenfels 2011: 15).

The conflict with oneself described in this life-story excerpt finds itself on the axis of the one who creates the value of the gift object. As a popular joke says – a good gift is the one you want to keep for yourself. The value attributed to the described item is the highest in terms of the price as to the money the child had in her pocket, and at the same time the object is unsurpassed in its splendor. It is impossible to renounce the desired object – it must be bought. It is also impossible to give it to someone else because the gift is just too good.

Therefore, the Self becomes that Other, who is addressed with all the ceremonies necessary for gift giving: “secretly packed at night and put under the Christmas tree”. Moreover, even the Self as the Other Self turns out not to be worthy of such a gift, at least not immediately (“I kept it in a drawer as a treasure for at least a couple of years”). This gift was too precious to give it

away so that not even the Self was able to accept it immediately (or to bypass the feeling of shame), and that effort was later accompanied by the thoroughness of the daily notes.

Certainly, the ceremony of wrapping the gift could also be held as a performance made for others (i.e., family members). This brings back the notion of guilt, for it might be too daring to simply take the object, but now it is officially (secretly) given by the “Santa Claus” as all other gifts under the Christmas tree.

This kind of Other Self becomes inaccessible, non-identical, different, alien Self. In his phenomenological discourse Waldenfels distinguishes between the terms Other and Alien. Alien is not like the dual Self and Other, it requires a complete separation from Ownness, which “arises when something withdraws from it, and exactly that which withdraws from what we experience as alien or heterogeneous” (Waldenfels 2011: 11).

In this situation the gift-giving Self and the receiving Self, as well as the event-experiencing Self and the remembering Self, are irreconcilably different subjects (but not persons). The first one to introduce and “legalize” such a division of the Self was Sigmund Freud with *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. With this most radical form of separation, we are never entirely present to ourselves as embodied beings: “The body is unlike any other object in that, though its five senses, and thus in multiple ways, it is both observer and observed” (Friesen 2014: 71).

A gift, like a poison (named *pharmakon* by Derrida), requires the mutuality of two subjects and a relationship. When it is missing, a conflict ensues – the division and alienation of the Self, the inability to forgive oneself (*pardonner* in French and *forgive* in English); in other words, the inability to accept oneself because of the separation of the Self and the Other Self is necessary to carry out the action.

It seems that with this hesitation and guilt, the pinnacle of cultural change was touched upon when giving the best thing to the Other turned into giving it to oneself. The resulting conflict and the rejection and alienation of the Self are resolved by a third party – the mother’s figure. By exchanging places with the gift-giving Self and by embodying the gift-giving person, the mother becomes the real Other. In this way, the giving and the receiving of a gift at the perceptive level is finally no longer opposed and can heal the guilt by creating a new world order – a consolation.

CASE 2: A WELL-DESERVED GIFT

Another story takes us back to Christmas again. And while it looks remarkably similar to the childhood memory about the UNICEF notebook, a different aspect is of great importance here – the certainty about giving a gift to oneself, contrary to the doubt in the first story.

The story of Mr. Edvinas (aged 48) reads as follows:

– As the Russians say, sebe liubimomu [to the beloved self], I always give something on my birthday and on Christmas Day. To myself. Well, I buy something, and I call it a Christmas present. For instance, as it was Christmas, I thought there was an opportunity to buy something, so I thought this would be a Christmas present for me [points to a smart bracelet on his hand]. Although, you know, I wanted to buy it a long time ago, but now I had the right opportunity.

– And what feeling do you get when you buy yourself a present?

– Like buying any other item for myself [laughs]. Nothing special. But it's just shopping, it is not the same as giving or receiving gifts. It gives pleasure. So, this is just pure shopping, just with a tint of a gift. [pause] Somehow this year I was even determined ... I simply saw an advertisement that there was a discount in a Mitsubishi showroom ... I went in, pressed [on the banner ad] and it said, "Give your old car back and get a new one," and I got interested. I was already excited that I was going to buy a new car. Basically, it would be a gift to myself, that's what I thought, that in the end, I am worthy of this gift [we both laugh], worthy of doing something nice for myself, and I was really into it. Then they asked me to write down the details of my car and promised to contact me. Unfortunately, the car seller said that since my car was from the US, they were unable to change it for a new one. So, this is how my gift failed ... I remained without a gift and then I bought myself this [smart bracelet].

– Right after?

– Yes, I thought, no, I won't buy a car, I will get that [bracelet].

This story testifies to an established value that cannot be avoided and eliminated; otherwise, it would be a loss. The way it was created and executed lines up into a whole narrative structure.

Value creation starts with car advertising. The interlocutor admits about feeling proud, saying, "I deserve it". The journey to the destination is interrupted by a challenge – various conditions and the need to fill out documents. A negative answer means that the car cannot become that dream "gift to oneself" but

the occasion (Christmas) and the need to give oneself a gift that is valuable enough (“because I am worth it”) remain. Moreover, the failure to do so results in a state of lack. This desired value is replaced by another type of gift – a smart bracelet. At the same time, it restores the sense of being able to control the world. You cannot affect the occurring circumstances, but you can change the conditions of your gift and choose a different object to accommodate the same meaning and value – just like in a fairy tale!

Here we can notice how a simple everyday practice of self-gifting behavior becomes a tool for unconscious self-evaluation. The material way to express self-value is encoded in the Indo-European language way deeper and in former times than it might look. According to the linguistic analysis of Émile Benveniste, “the value attributed to somebody is measured by the offerings of which he is judged worthy” (Benveniste 1973). He elaborated this idea in another famous article, where he analyzed the terms related to the notions of the gift, giving, and receiving in Indo-European languages. In his conclusions, he directly linked the notions of exchange, value, and meaning fairly widespread in Indo-European vocabularies: “Value’ is characterized, in its ancient expression, as a ‘value of exchange’ in the most material sense. ... This ‘value’ assumes its meaning for whoever disposes of a human body, whether it is a daughter to marry or a prisoner to sell” (Benveniste 1997: 42). But then with whom and how does the exchange take place when you participate in it with yourself? Could this be related to one’s own duties and efforts demanding a moral reward?

In marketing research, one aspect of giving gifts to oneself is the illusion of an ideal perceived individuality. Mick and Demoss note that in a situation of giving gifts to oneself, a well-disciplined ideal Self congratulates and rewards the real Self (often quite lazy) for perseverance in pursuing a personal goal (Mick & Demoss 1990: 328). According to Christine Ennew (n.d.), various marketing research results indicate that, although the usual term is “self-gift *giving*”, it is the symbolic value of *receiving* that matters to consumers.

In phenomenological philosophy, in the texts of different authors, from Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty to contemporary authors, further developing their ideas (e.g. Waldenfels), the intersubjectivity is explained by the connections between the elements of the Self, the Other, and the World. The intertwined and different ideas on this topic reveal the complexity of the phenomenon itself. To apply a phenomenological approach in anthropology that looks at a particular experience and the manifestation of otherness that takes place in it, I will not cling to one theory but try to look at where the text of experience leads.

In Edvinas’ story about the gift, the construct of perceiving the presence of the Ideal Self and the Real Self requires separating oneself and the Other not only externally but again within the Self. Without thinking about it, he calls

it *sebe liubimomu* [to the beloved self], by drawing the Self's relationship with itself as a bond of love and grace. Thus, if the Self sees itself as the Other, the direct relationship of the Self with the Other becomes impossible – it is constantly overshadowed by the relationship with the image of the Other – in this case, the image of the Other Self, as an object observed or imagined from the outside. The Other Self, imagined by the Self, is not real. It is an illusion created to get to know and build relationships with oneself, seen as a relation between the Self and the Other Self. In other words, we could explain that calling a purchase a gift makes it morally legitimate and gives the feeling that the man is worthy of it. So, this imaginative distance is precisely what makes the transaction legitimate.

Therefore, the identity of the subject, the closeness to oneself also becomes impossible. The efforts of the Self to build a relationship with the Other Self are insufficient because their existence is not enough – one needs to know and feel what that relationship is, i.e., what it is worth, what is the meaning of its existence. This means that being *per se* is not enough; being needs its supplement – a meaning, a value, which at the same time becomes a substitute. And the individual can only receive this meaning of being from a supposed Other, in a way to create value, as mentioned by Benveniste – through an exchange (Benveniste 1997). This brings us to the Saussurean notion of meaning for it can only be possible through the difference (from other meanings). So the value can also be perceived through comparison – presuming *how* valuable it is.

In order for the respondent Self's favor to oneself – *sebe liubimomu* [the beloved self] – to be fulfilled, the Other is needed; and for the exchange to happen, even more – a constantly recurring chain of exchange is established (“I always give something on my birthday and on Christmas. To myself”). Edvinas is sure about the legitimacy of such an exchange between “I am worthy” and “I receive a gift”. It is common sense in his world. Therefore, the failure of such a chain, the ritual repetition of the gifts to oneself, is impossible. It would deny the unnamed existence of the Self's relationship with oneself and its value, constantly repeated through non-verbal experience.

CASE 3: A SELF-GIFT THAT A TRAVELING SELF BRINGS TO THE OTHER SELF AT HOME

I witnessed the third story about the “gift to oneself” on a trip to Bratislava. A fellow passenger Lidija was incredibly careful in collecting souvenirs for all her relatives and co-workers back at home and she was especially pleased with the cute little thing that she chose for herself. While demonstrating her

purchase, she explicitly called it a gift to herself, then carefully unwrapped the object out of paper to show it and then wrapped it again and put it back in her handbag. As we walked around the city and went to a cafe for some pie, she agreed to tell me what she thought about gifts.

Mrs. Lidija (aged 62):

When I give a gift, I always want it to be lovely for me too. I do not agree it's enough to choose any gift. I need to like the gift first; I want to like it enough to be able to buy the same one for myself and be happy about it. That is why I think about the person but also about myself, about what I would like and what would be as good for others as for myself. Then I go and give a gift with pleasure because I know that I like it too.

You would say, a gift is such a small thing, but it contains so many facets. Sometimes it happens that I am given an expensive gift. It is costly but does not warm me up. And then, on the other hand, someone brings me a tiny little thing, or a small present when they return from a journey [it's quite different].

I sometimes say to myself that we are living in the era of globalism and who needs all those little knick-knacks, they are everywhere, already too many of them. But I feel the opposite. You see, there are many such little things in my house: stones, little trinkets from the places I have visited, or someone has gifted them to me. I cannot throw them away and I am not that modern. Others tell me – why do you hoard, they collect dust. But I say that is life, that is how it is, some people throw everything away and don't have anything, they live in a sterile environment, there are no things surrounding them. But when I see an object and remember that person or how I was in a place, it gives me pleasure. So, I look at that thing and it seems so cute, so nice. It reminds me of that person, that moment, when I received it or when I was somewhere. That object contains plenty of information. And all these have been given as gifts, sometimes even to myself. And when you give a gift to yourself, it simply happens that you are going somewhere and you think – I want that, there is that wish. And I think, why do I need it, I am already criticized for that particular behavior of mine and attachment to all these little things. Others ask, “Why do you need it?” My children ask, “Mom, why do you need that?” And I tell them, “You know, that is my character. That thing characterizes my state for me.” People sometimes say, “Your kitchen is full of things,” and I answer, “Yes, my kitchen has character, that's how it is.” ...

For me, things carry information, they are not that empty. Someone made them, they were bought with intention. Evelina [older daughter],

she is artsy, so, she says that she likes, she likes my [collected] samovars but sometimes she says, "Mom, you have no style." And I don't care about style, I don't live for style. What matters to me is not how the things look, how they are put together but what they carry inside them. I say, think what you want, but that is how I am and that's it.

The respondent's words reminded me about the lesson that anthropological science took from archeology: material culture is a vehicle for meaning and at the same time the culture itself is not possible without this material infrastructure (Engelke 2017: 41). For the woman, her things are an important part of the process of creating meaning in the world around her.

I would like to pay attention to the moment when the lady explained how precious various gifts were to her, and, without being asked, mentioned her own gifts to herself. The respondent did exactly the same thing in practice: she bought a little decoration that she saw in the street of a city we both visited and called it "a gift to herself" – not a souvenir, not a purchase, but a gift. In the respondent's story, an inexpensive trinket with no practical value, even a pebble, after becoming a gift, becomes a fully valuable thing because it provides pleasure, creates a possibility of memory, thus making the trip meaningful, and gives us an opportunity to bring the experienced moment home.

For the woman, the gift simultaneously materializes many layers of meanings: impression, feeling, memory, and geographic location. At the same time, she allows herself to exchange all these "goods" with herself too. Consequently, if you award yourself with the impressions, journeys, feelings, and moods you experience, you can also reward yourself for that and be grateful.

One of the fields of meaning that Lidija's gift to herself embodies in her story is belonging to a particular social group. The woman sees herself as a member of a community (family, the circle of friends), and without distinguishing herself from others, provides everyone, including herself, with gifts. Such an action attaches the same importance and value to herself as to the surrounding loved ones. And vice versa, Lidija loves her friends and family as much as she loves herself when she says that even if the gift is intended for someone else, she has to like the gift herself first.

Another particularly important aspect is that she has mentioned memory more than once. In the respondent's words, the gift given to oneself "carries that information", reminds of the journey, the moment, the feeling, and it constantly recurs "when you look at that thing". For Lidija, this memory is sensual, it is inseparable from the state of experience, as she says, "That thing characterizes the state for me"; in other words, it materializes and captures the impressions she had during the experience.

The material form given to experience signifies the process of giving meaning, which is existentially important to this lady. The respondent was pleased (which did not make it to the recording) that after finding a gift for herself, she could finally relax because she had purchased it. While enjoying the object, she felt like she had achieved the purpose of the trip, thus at the same time establishing and acquiring the signifier of the trip, referring to the journey as meaning.

This transformation illustrates the difference between meaning and significance. Having found the signifier of the travel experience, in her own words “a trinket”, a “little thing”, the narrator experiences a sense of completeness and fruition. Her experience and her own intention thus become preserved “full of information” and can therefore continue. The opposite of this would be the anxiety of oblivion. The experience without given meaning would pass in vain and disappear.

The process of creating and providing meaning in the respondent’s story is very important. We should remember that in both French and English a gift is also called a present (like the present tense, or the one that is present). The moment of “here and now” in French is also given, provided – *moment donné*. Lidija’s act of giving meaning, as if it were a given moment of the present, signifies a constitutive act – nothing can simply exist by itself if it is not provided, given, or simply gifted.

Lidija’s “gift to herself” equally constitutes the world and its elements: thoughts, memories, state, being, and the sudden, unstoppable desire to acquire all that (when “you are going somewhere and you think – I want that, there is that wish”). Such constitutive (gifting) power becomes almost mythological. Anne Salmond, recalling the Maori Hou phenomenon popularized by Mauss (the need to pass on the good as a gift) recognized it in the Polynesian cosmogonic hymn recorded in Rangiroa in 1854. In the hymn, the knowing Self – the thought, the memory, the feeling, the knowledge, and the desire – exists before the whole real world (Salmond 2000: 40). Lidija’s gift surprisingly covers the same areas of existence.

However, in experience, as in speech, there are no givens, nothing is ever given “as such”, nothing is given in being, in present, but everything manifests as references of some elements to others. Such a transition from the linguistic to the experiential sphere is based on the premise that human experience is not the experience of things, empirical givens, but the experience of meanings. That is why for Lidija as well, “all the little things” “are not so empty”.

At this point, we can recall Derrida’s insight that a gift ceases to exist as soon as it is given and therefore is not an object but a process (Derrida 1991: 27). The objecthood of the gift represents the corporeality of the process, it embodies what is intangible and indescribable, and becomes a sensual (bodily)

expression of the transformation of the relationship between the subjects. This makes it possible to talk about the fact that a gift, being a part of the action (ritual, celebration or, as in this example, a journey), corresponds to the moment of culmination – a transformation (of relationship and state). By purchasing all the necessary souvenirs and giving presents to everyone (including herself) the goal of the trip is achieved for Lidija. From this point onward, the goal of the journey turns backward – toward home, where it will be possible to remember the experienced impressions, to talk about them, and to give out all the goodies to those who were on her mind when she was far away from home.

Moreover, the ritual of memory is continuously recurring, which is why the mentioned items at home, so important to this woman, are arranged in a visible spot, no matter the “style”. The pleasure received every time she sees her little treasures shows the exchange chain that starts working from the very moment of the constitution – what is given, comes back later. The given attention returns as obtainable pleasure under the principle of reciprocity.

Paradoxically, until the goal (to return to the loved ones) is achieved, the gifts purchased for them become a substitute, a signifier not of the trip but of the loved ones’ being somewhere far away at home. The gift, acquired but not yet delivered, acts as a link that brings you closer to what you want to belong. Then where does the Self of the person, who buys a gift for themselves, end up, when the gift has already been bought?

The answer can be captured in the detail of how Lidija keeps a carefully wrapped gift for herself in her handbag. The traveling Self will give a self-gift only at home – to that other Self remaining there. And this opens up more dualities of the Self: the self-perception as if looking from the outside but also in terms of time – a look at yourself in the present versus in the future as well as in the past and even geographically – looking at yourself here and yourself at home.

The Other Self, distant in time, was the first story’s main character’s object of desire as well. The heroine with her notebook was able to build a relationship with the Self of the past only two decades later, with the help of memory and self-reflection – the relationship of the Self with the Other Self, the most radical other, Alien Self. The Self on the journey is also alien, distant in time, space, and social space to which they will have to be accepted again on their return.

It is worth asking why the Self and the Alien Self in the first story about the expensive notebook caused conflict and suffering, and in Lidija’s story she radiates nothing but joy. Waldenfels associates the opposition of alienation with rationality, “Generally speaking, all human beings have the same logos as their common logos, and the more rational we are, the less alien we are to each other” (Waldenfels 2007: 3). The narrator cannot directly reclaim the past,

and absence, distance, or inaccessibility constitute alienness or otherness as such (ibid.: 9). However, the past can be reached through its consequences or recollection. So, the constantly recurring focus on meaningful objects is precisely the act of remembrance, a recollection that solves the problem of alienness.

One more aspect: giving gifts to oneself implies the need to make oneself meaningful, significant, i.e., valuable. And value, as already mentioned, can only be expressed in the form of an exchange. In other words, self-gifting implicates the need to make the Self meaningful, and the attributed meaning can then be evaluated and made valuable.

A gift, like a multilayered text, can contain value that is transferred regardless of what separates one subject from the other. It can be awareness, time, distance, belonging to a group, and other possible aspects that separate the existing Self from the perceived Other Self, but this separation is inevitable, just like the gift, which is the only thing that can ensure continuity of connection.

Listening to Lidija's words, it is difficult not to notice that society is interwoven in her ritual of giving gifts to herself. People around her judge her behavior as she repeats it several times: "They ask, why do you need it? My children ask, "Mom, why do you need that?", "Your kitchen is full of things."

Peter Howland, researching the tourists' habit of "giving themselves pleasure" and tasting wine, highlights the need for identity, belonging to a certain group in society (for example, the middle class). It is accompanied by the purchase of emphatically unnecessary but expensive items, wasteful behavior (Howland 2010: 53–74).

Gifts and the issue of their value are an important part of Lidija's identity too: "that is my character", "that is how I am and that's it". She does not base the acquisition of seemingly unnecessary items on belonging to a social group but attributes it to personality traits: character, imagination. Contrary to the need for belonging, described by Howland (2010), the desire to stand out from others and striving for individuality can be noticed here. And it is determined not only by the meanings of identity but also by the perception of value – what others see as worthless things, "collecting dust" without style, are not "so empty" for the respondent. For her, they carry "plenty of information" and "give pleasure". This value, based on individuality and identity traits, becomes a true material expression of self-worth.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While researching the phenomenon of gift giving to oneself, three reviewed situations touched on different, though not finite aspects of this phenomenon. The first situation was about the desire for a self-gift and guilt. The second was about the necessity and inevitability of the self-gift for self-esteem as a reward, and the third was about the desire and pleasure as well as a ritualistic return to the moment of experience, acting as an endless chain of exchange.

This shows how complex, ambiguous, and at the same time individual a behavior pattern can be. Such practices of giving self-gifts stay unnoticed in everyday life without causing surprise. It can often be seen in commercials as if it were part of an integral self-evident behavior, and yet it is not.

The episode of childhood memories, featuring the personal struggle of hesitation as to whether the action was justified or not, as well as Lidija's efforts to justify her liking for gifts to her family and friends, raises another issue of changing public attitudes. The gift giving to oneself, in the stories of both women, is received ambiguously. It is devalued by oneself or others and at the same time legitimized, justified, and therefore continued.

It turns out that giving something to yourself, especially on special occasions and holidays, is an increasingly popular trend. *Business Insider* has published a study by the NPD Group, an American market research company, that shoppers are "self-gifting" more from year to year. This means that as shoppers go about their holiday gift-buying duties, they are also buying a few not-so-little things for themselves. This study shows that more people plan to buy more for themselves for the upcoming holiday. Nineteen percent of respondents said they would definitely spend more on themselves, while 40% said they might. Often this is a ritual behavior: many customers wait until the holidays to buy for themselves the thing they have had their eye on all year. There are also plenty of more advertised sales during the holidays, which can influence shoppers to pull the trigger (Green 2017).

The NPD Group's study reveals a trend without explaining its reasons, but the analysis of my interviews and memories suggests this phenomenon could be related to individuality and a sort of person's splitting in two. In the first story, the one who is buying the notebook establishes herself not only as a receiver but also as a giving subject. Lidija experiences her individuality through the value that exists only for her. Edvinas, on the contrary, has no doubts; he does not think things could be otherwise – for him gift giving for himself is a normal and unquestionable thing, therefore unstoppable, even in case of failure.

Moreover, research conducted in Lithuania (in January 2021) among 1,013 respondents, with the help of "Spinter tyrimai", a Lithuanian public opinion

research company, revealed that 21% of interviewees are sometimes giving gifts to themselves, especially women and respondents with the highest level of education. This proves the new practice is widely known, yet requires an intellectual approach and self-consideration to be examined more attentively.

Here we could raise a broader question: did the concept of self-perception of the Self, the duality of the Self, and the accompanying philosophy in society serve the economic idea of over-consumption, or, on the contrary, did the economic development stimulate a certain philosophy revealed in the experience? After all, the traditions of gift giving, which inspired the first works of anthropologists, were also emphatically extravagant, such as the exchange of *Kula* necklaces or *potlatch* feasts.¹

In the contemporary narratives studied, meaning took precedence over value; in other words, it is a value-creating meaning. However, unlike historically perceived collective behavior, in these experiences, the intention to act is completely individualistic and even separates the subject from the surrounding society (Lidija describes such attitude by saying: “Think of it as you like”).

This marks a change in the relationship with oneself. It is not the society but the Self; more precisely, the Ideal Self is acting like a self-establishing subject. The relationship with the Other is transposed to a dualistic Self: the Self can be the Other to itself and even the Alien, and the Other remains either non-existent (in Edvinas’ case) or opposed (Lidija’s loved ones), or disadvantaged (feeling guilty about a gift that was given to oneself instead of others). These could be the examples of how people perceive themselves or even live in modern society alone and integrate into it not through collectivity but through emphasized individuality and uniqueness, which is the basis of the value created through the exchange with oneself. That is how a gift becomes an opportunity and a measure to build a relationship not just with others but with yourself.

Finally let us get back to the contradiction or the paradox of the self-gift named in the very beginning – is it even possible? For Marcell Mauss it was the obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate, so it presupposes two participants: the giver and the receiver. Marcel Hénaff, French philosopher and anthropologist, in his book *The Philosophers’ Gift* affirms that a gift requires otherness, and this must include real and autonomous persons: otherness “can never result from a combination of solitary operations” (Hénaff 2020: 148). The possibility of giving presupposes a personal difference or distance between the giver and the recipient, and therefore, according to Hénaff, there can be no such things as self-gifts. He arguments it by quoting Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (§ 268):

Why can't my right hand give my left hand money? My right hand can put it into my left hand. My right hand can write a deed of gift and my left hand a receipt. But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. (Wittgenstein 1997: 94)

But with this example Wittgenstein continues: "And the same could be asked if a person had given himself a private definition of a word. I mean, if he has said the word to himself and at the same time has directed his attention to a sensation." I would suggest a self-gift, evidently used in the vocabulary, is more a tool of communication, a word, a statement, a form to express the sensation. So, it is not the reciprocity it produces, but the consciousness, the possibility to reconsider oneself in a particular context (in the analyzed cases: the Christmas of a child becoming an adult, the reward for hard work or the experience of a journey).

I would like to get back to Derrida, for whom the gift itself is impossible. For if ontologically the gift is gratuitous, not motivated, and disinterested (Sartre 1992 [1983]: 390), then practically it never is.

One of the most fruitful discussions about the gift was developed by Derrida and his former student Jean Luc Marion, who revealed the concept of givenness by extending *being* to *being given*. In order to appear to oneself, "I must discover myself as a given and gifted phenomenon" (Marion 2007: 22). José Santana Wellington followed the link between Derrida and Marion to inquire whether love can or cannot follow the same gift pattern: "A person only gets a sense of his own existence and happiness when he meets the other as an equal and capable of sharing life" (Wellington 2016: 443). For him, vanity is opposed to love, and a person is endangered to be entrapped in "a selfish lifestyle in which exchanging becomes impossible" (ibid.: 444).

But can a gift to myself be treated as pure vanity? I would rather link it to the repetition or imitation of the outer world within the experience of solitude. In the first story, the self-gift (the notebook) appears as a milestone of perception that, as an adult caring for others, one should pass from the receiver's role to become the giver, yet the childhood still holds the little girl, so she feels the guilt until the gift is perceived as a gift from her mother. In the second story the man buys himself an electronic bracelet as a reward and a reward is a sign of culturally established recognition. In his case self-esteem and self-reward then require the culturally established model of gaining a prize. And in the third story a woman was traveling back home with a souvenir; as she bought treats to all the people she loved, she unwittingly included herself in this circle of beloved ones she cared about.

So, if we take Marion's concept, in which the givenness is as a substitute for creation (Marion 2011: 20), then the gift may be seen not (just) as a sign of relation, but a model of self-establishment: a statement of existence in which I am for the world and the world is for me. This way the self-gift could be seen not just as a relation to the inner-self but a relation to the whole surrounding world – everything and no one at the same time, like an open significant, ready to be linked to any meaning.

This way a self-gift can prompt us a hypothesis that the very existence is intersubjective – it is always existence for someone. Here I would like to distinguish the difference between the concepts of the subject and the person. In this case the personal understanding of the existence introduces two distant subjects, two variations of myself: the one I am and the one I perceive. And this perception is impossible without the distance between these two subjects and without the concept of what a distance is.

“What you are regarding as a gift is a problem for you to solve,” wrote Wittgenstein in his personal writings (Wittgenstein 2013: 99). Let us stay with this proposition, as self-gifts could be in the middle between the following oppositions (perhaps the members of the *Revue du MAUSS* would agree with them): between a problem and a solution; solitude and selfishness; inferiority and vanity; and finally – love to yourself and to others. And then love to yourself is only possible along with love to others.

NOTES

¹ *Kula* is known as a ritualic gift exchange system by the people of the Trobriand Islands of southeast Melanesia. It was first described by Malinowski (1922). The red shell necklaces and white shell bracelets were traveling hundreds of miles in opposite directions around a geographic ring of islands. These objects could not stay with the owner forever and had to travel as a precious gift and a sign of prestige, and the efforts of the kin group of the host were exerted to maximize the generosity. *Potlatch* is another tradition, practiced by the American Indians of the Northwest Pacific coast, especially among the Kwakiutl. It comprises ceremonial gatherings and great feasts with guests, gifts and distribution of property dedicated to establishing a social status (Augustyn 2020). This way the prestige was gained not by accumulating goods but on the contrary – by the ability to give out as much as possible.

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