**debt, human/人情(Rén Qíng)**

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**Debt of gratitude / dette personnelle**

In modern Western cultural and linguistic contexts, the most common understanding of the word ‘debt’ invariably refers to a material – most often financial, obligation toward someone or some entity; in other words, the duty of having to pay back for example a certain sum of money borrowed for a set period of time. Though, the idea of ‘personal debt of gratitude’ that echoes in part the Chinese word 人情does not directly suggest a material, pecuniary obligation. In the context of European languages ‘debt’ understood as liability to make a payment is relatively recent as it dates back to the fourteenth century[[1]](#footnote-1). The word, however, has a longer history and more universal meaning. As its Latin etymology suggests (debitum: thing owed), a debt implies more generally owing some-thing to some-one such as a parent, a friend, a teacher, a mentor, or even other entities that do not necessarily refer to a single person. For example, one would talk of being indebted to ancient Greek civilisation for its humanistic and democratic values or to the Tang dynasty for the genius and refinement of its arts and techniques; in an Abrahamic religious context, one would invoke her or his debt towards God thus historically paving the way for such or such code of moral values in the form of sacred texts be they the Torah, the Bible, or the Coran; one may also be indebted toward society for providing her or him with vital needs, practical comfort, education, civil protection, or laws that guaranty responsible freedom of ideas and expression; or, in the age of Antropocene that shows unbearable levels of pollution across the globe, one can talk about being indebted to nature in the sense of having the duty to recognise the extraordinary chance humankind has been given to live and evolve the way it does, owing to the natural milieu within it finds itself.

Needless to say, these forms of gratitude do not carry the same pejorative social connotation as with material debts such as financial ones. Yet, to be indebted towards someone or something always implies various modes of reciprocity. One is clear, concrete and operational as with, of course, financial debt that must be paid back in return from an initial loan, or a criminal who is ordered by a court of justice to pay her or his debt to society in whatever form of condemnation. The other is ethical. Indeed, with the debt of gratitude one does not pay back concretely per se individuals or whatever entities. The mode of reciprocity is therein unexplicit, indirect and felt. The response translates into admiration, respect, and even in some cases beatitude.

Modern Western societies are obviously under no binding moral obligation to pay back the legacy of ancient Greece any more than modern China is to the Tang dynasty, believers to God, children to parents, individuals to society, or humankind to nature. Rather, the debt amounts to a tacit ethical recognition to how much one owes to entities other than oneself. This conception is well encapsulated by, for example, T.S. Eliot when he wrote of James Joyce’s Ulysses (1922) that  ‘It is a book to which we are all indebted and from which none of us can escape’[[2]](#footnote-2). To many, contemporary literature in the Western world whether in its modernist or postmodernist version owes much to Joyce’s Ulysses, for it announced new literary forms of expression by defacing the past and moving towards self-reflexivity or by revisiting the same past, but ‘not innocently’ as Umberto Eco famously pointed out in his Postille al nome della rosa (1983)[[3]](#footnote-3). Again, the debt to which T.S. Eliot refers can only be tacit; it is a mode of rendering that translates into a course of recognition of what subsequent writers owe to Joyce, a gratitude that by no means amounts to materially paying back a debt. A more Marxist approach would emphasise the debt that the artist, for example, owes to his or her economic, social and cultural environments, the spirit of the time, or the historical period. When George Plekhanov in Art and Social Life (Iskusstvo i obshchestvennaya zhizn, 1912)[[4]](#footnote-4) contends that great artists express their time but cannot change the course of history; that the source of the work of art lies in its socio-economic substructure; or that form is determined by content for art is the mirror of social life, he is doing no more than highlighting the determining role of the socio-economic essence of art to which the artist is indebted. In actual fact, the debt of gratitude is here not as tacit as it seems: the only authentic form of art is allegedly the one that shows us the truth of the socio-economic conditions of life[[5]](#footnote-5).There lies the material debt of the artist: social realism becomes the only means by which the artist can pay back what she or he owes to society, making redundant other forms of artistic expressions or movements such as modernism or naturalism that are consequently considered to be decadent. From this angle, this ideologically oriented debt is material rather than ethical. But there also lies, on the other side of the spectrum, a conception of art whose creativity is the stuff of scandal, violence and even rupture. Exception artists, the ones written about by Philippe Sollers in his Théorie des exceptions (1986)[[6]](#footnote-6), do not express any debt even if of gratitude in the act of creating. Quite the opposite. Their works are anything but respectful, conventional, or expected. Here, the genius artist breaks the rules of ownership and expected reciprocity. The great artists do not owe society the truth of art in its own image. Rather, they are the singular perpetuators of exemplary models at the origin of the formation of cultures, to use a Kantian rhetoric[[7]](#footnote-7). In this sense, it is society itself that owes exception artists a debt of gratitude at the very least.

In whatever case, debt as a form of ethical response towards otherness inexorably raises the question of freedom at both personal and societal levels. If a material debt is by definition a binding obligation making thus interpretive issues of freedom irrelevant, such is not the case with the debt of gratitude. The latter leaves it up to the beneficiary to honour it. In this sense the debt of gratitude amounts to a non-binding sense of responsibility with regard to the ‘other’ –  not in terms of infinity understood as quality of the ‘face’ of the other as for Emmanuel Levinas[[8]](#footnote-8), but rather as something identifiable and indeed recognisable. This conception of debt of gratitude shares much in common with what Gabriel Marcel defined as ‘availability’ (disponibilité), which he viewed as a necessary condition for creative formation in interpersonal relationships[[9]](#footnote-9). The fundamental distinction between availability and submission lies in the freedom of decision to engage in such relationships. Similarly, the debt of gratitude must preserve such degree of freedom if it is not to turn into one-sided control and coercion unavoidably leading in the worst case to corruption and blackmailing for self-interest.

Finally, the debt of gratitude portrayed as a non-binding, tacit feeling for ethical response because of the good one benefits from the other could be contrasted with what is implied in the Judeo-Christian idealised conception of the ‘gift’, which as Jacques Derrida qualified it ‘must not be bound, in its purity, not even binding, obligatory or obliging’[[10]](#footnote-10). Hence the aporia of the gift, for concrete lived experience makes it impossible to eradicate all traces of expectation of return in one form or another – just to mention, for example, when one expects to be thanked by the one who receives a gift. Despite that, the debt of gratitude contains within it the same aporia Derrida identified with the gift insofar as the former is an ethical response to someone or something by way of exchange that must remain non-binding. To address its aporia, the debt of gratitude could then be understood as a freely chosen response in the form of reciprocal gift. What makes such response intrinsically ethical rests precisely on its element of freedom of decision.

1. Barnhart, Robert K., ed., Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology, H.W. Wilson Co., 1988; Klein, Dr. Ernest, A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Co., 1971; Liberman, Anatoly, Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology, University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Weekley, Ernest, An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English, John Murray, 1921; reprint 1967, Dover Publications. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidoe, eds., Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998), 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently’. Umberto Eco, Umberto. (1984). Postscript to The Name of the Rose, trans W. Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 67-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. George V. Plekhanov, Unaddressed Letters. Art and Social Life, trans. A. Fineberg (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An artist can be really inspired only by what is capable of facilitating intercourse among [human beings]. The possible limits of such intercourse are not determined by the artist, but by the level of culture attained by the social entity to which [she or he] belongs.’ Ibid, Part III. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Philippe Sollers, Théorie des exceptions (Paris : Collection Folio, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement [Kritik der Urteilskraft, 1790], §46-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Emmanuel Levinas, Totalité et Infini : Essai sur l’extériorité (La Haye : Martinus Nijhoff, 1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Gabriel Marcel, Homo viator. Prolégomènes à une métaphysique de l’espérance (Paris : Aubier, 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jacques Derrida, Donner le Temps (Paris : Éditions Galilée) [Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 137]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)