

An Alternative Glossary of Exchange

**This text appears in Ends Meet: Essays on Exchange,*

Trying to secure the significance of a word may result in a chain of associations without an ultimate resolution, especially when the term covers a wide expanse of contexts as in the case of 'exchange'. 'An act of giving one thing and receiving another (especially of the same kind) in return.'^[1]

This definition appears to be explicit, lucid, crystalline but quite dull. At times, concepts can be so elementary and easy to understand that, paradoxically, finding the proper words to fix their meanings becomes an onerous task; any attempt to provide descriptions of them ends in lack of precision and an excess of tedious phrasing. In fact, as John Locke pointed out three centuries ago the simplest ideas are often the hardest to define.^[2] Without going as far as the philosopher, it is reasonable to say that 'exchange' stands for a simple action, opening up myriad circumstances and countless correlations which are not conveyed by its dictionary definition. In particular, the quotation above lacks the sense of irreversibility and the ceaseless transference that 'exchange' can imply. In other words, its meaning evokes the idea of separate elements meeting at a halfway point and embracing some kind of transformation – potentially creating an endless stream of connections. Where the dictionary definition is not exhaustive, a series of exchanges between various disciplines, from etymology to medicine, creates a more extensive glossary.

'Ex', a prefix from Latin, meets the term 'cambiare' (barter) in the late Roman era and becomes *excambiare* (exchange).^[3] Passing through France, it arrives in England at the end of the fourteenth century. From then onwards, 'ex' and 'cambiare' will evolve both separately and as a unit. When tied to the word 'change', 'ex' signifies the completeness of the action, a process which is perfect in its totality. However, it accompanies words that portray a sense of removal, releasing and leaving out too, thereby encompassing acts which have stopped or are negated to let something new or different begin, for example 'to exclude'. These two contrasting meanings of 'ex' come together to define a state which has ceased, a previous meaning of totality which belongs to the past. This happens when 'ex' is added to titles or names. Amongst these 'wife' and 'husband' are the most illustrative examples. Some dictionaries contain a peculiar additional point of information for this entry of the prefix: that the exhaustion of the process does not also imply the exhaustion of the person. He/she can be said to be 'former, but still living'.^[4]

On the other hand, there are some words with the prefix 'ex' that denote bonds which can never be broken. A few of them are manifested through

eternal and divine relations, as articulated by the term 'ex-voto'. This locution is shortened from the Latin 'ex voto suscepto' meaning 'from the vow made', [5] and refers to the act of offering an object in exchange for divine help or to give thanks for the divine assistance one has received. Ex-votos are symbols of gratitude and devotion, from the worshipers towards the subjects of their adoration: the deities. While the first votive offerings were mainly statuettes of animals, weapons, fertility and cult symbols, today ex-votos include a variety of articles which mostly belong to the Christian tradition. In the Sala dos Milagres (room of miracles) of the Church of Nosso Senhor do Bonfim in Salvador, Brazil, an assortment of diverse symbolic objects can be found. Over 2,000 items, made of gold, bronze, silver, wax and wood have been collected in this space since 1975. The most remarkable of these is a row of plastic body parts representing cured ailments. Legs, arms, faces and hands all hang from the walls as evidence for subsequent visitors of the received grace; embodiments of the enduring union between the healer and the healed.

On ex-voto paintings, anecdotes relative to special events can be told through visual and written elements. Within the history of Christian religions, ex-voto art began to spread during the fifteenth century. In Mexico, the proliferation of this practice between the eighteenth and nineteenth century is such that canvases depicting miracles can go under several names, for example 'votive paintings', 'retablo' and 'lamina'. [6] Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were among the first collectors of these paintings. Either found in churches or in art exhibitions, they give shape to the immaterial encounter of ordinary existences with extraordinary episodes, freezing turning points in people's everyday life.

Continuing to swim with the symbolic current of religion and spirituality, the Christian 'X' (etymologically the origin of 'ex') represents the Cross, the most meaningful among the symbols, standing for the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In his study of signs, Rudolf Koch describes the cross as traditionally being representative of the meeting between divinity and the everyday, the first corresponding to the vertical line, the second to the horizontal. [7] For this reason, the point of intersection of the cross can be said to mark the union of tangible things and spiritual ones, of the issues of real life and the hopes for immaterial life after death.

This same crossing of lines is also the basic structure of churches and cathedrals, the representation of the communion of spirituality with actual society, architecturally materialised by a cruciform floor plan. Whereas the Latin cross structure has a longer nave crossed by a shorter transept, the Greek cross church is built on four arms of equal length. This style was more typical of the architecture of Eastern Christianity and was re-evaluated during the Italian Renaissance. Many architects of the time saw their ideal churches having a perfect symmetrical structure, which would favour the encounter with a perfect God. Designing the rebuilding of the San Peter's Basilica in Rome in 1503, Donato Bramante envisioned a

Greek cross plan, which he considered the ideal representation of the union between the sublime universe and the world.

Pursuing the act of replacing one thing for another, the X shaped churches and the X shaped house built on a hill in Barcelona shows markedly different aspirations. Designed by the architects Cadaval & Solà-Morales in 2012, this two-storey residence communes instead with the natural divinity of the surrounding landscape. On one side, a terrace faces the enchanting mountains, while on the other, large windows favour charming views of the sea and the swimming pool. More than seeking otherworldly relations, the owners wanted to maximise the enjoyment of the moment and the panorama from the house.

In an analogous way, the words 'contemporary', 'actual', 'humorous' and a little 'frivolous' qualify Martin Creed's interest in 'X'. Recently he confessed his fascination for crosses, as they symbolise his dislike for making decisions. 'X' is neither vertical nor horizontal, its shape embraces both possibilities while denying them at the same time, thus it avoids the binary quality of usual choices. Furthermore, Creed believes crosses to be remarkable because they are like kisses.

Text messages end with lots of crosses as symbolic kisses. It is possible to send huge amounts of them just by pressing, compulsively, XXXXXXXXXXXX (...). These are modern products of popular culture, the same culture that has benefitted from the forceful presence of the X-Men since 1963. The X-Men are neither celestial creatures nor humans; they are heroic mutants who use their powers to help humanity. In this sense, the X-Men embody the connection of real world necessities with supernatural forces. Created by the American publisher Marvel, the characters possess the 'X gene', a special empowering factor lacked by normal humans. In the stream of secular publications which have been produced until now, some pertinent names are *X-Treme X-Men*, *Ultimate X-Men*, *Uncanny X-Men*, *X-Infernus* and *Age of X*. Despite the schisms, narrative changes, cancellations, title relaunches, and resurrections of characters, which took place during different editorships, in 2012 a curiously devout title came out: *Second Coming*.

The upcoming series of the British TV music competition *The X Factor* will be the eleventh incarnation. As for X-Men, departures and returns of personalities and presenters characterise the programme, whose judging panel for the next autumn season is still in debate. The term 'X Factor' refers to the indefinable special quality of the winners of the vocal contest; the X gene that they boast and which is unknown to the general public.

'Xmas' or 'Xian' are names hinting at a much more omnipotent celebrity. The X here is used to abbreviate the name of Christ. This equivalence was inherited from Greek, where 'X' corresponds to the letter Chi. In the dialogue *Timaeus*, the Greek philosopher Plato explained how the two

bands forming the soul of the world are joined to one another at the centre, like the letter 'X',[8] whose crossing therefore embodies the original meeting point: the axis upon which the world revolves and changes.

Insisting on incidental encounters leading to perpetual alterations, 'Chi' is the basis for the name 'chiasm' and the words derived from it. Each of them encompasses forms of irreversible fusion. The chiasmus (literally 'to shape like the letter 'X')[9] is a literary device that connects two or more clauses through inverted parallelism. On a visual level, it is represented by an 'X', to indicate that the first element will appear again at the end or will be associated to the last one, while the second element will be reiterated twice in sequence. When a text includes chiastic phrasings, its content is generated not through the single words, but through the inherent relations between them. A good number of ancient texts, such as the Old and New Testament, accommodate this device. Famous sentences such as, 'But many that are *first!* shall be *last!* and the *last!* shall be *first!*'[10] were easily memorised and repeated thanks to their chiastic structure.

Another evolution of 'Chi' promotes the coalescence of things, in particular with regard to the formation of cells. The genetic term 'chiasma' indicates the point at which two homologous chromosomes remain in contact during the first phase of meiosis (the cell division necessary for their reproduction), forming a graceful cross shape. By duplicating, they become chromatids and exchange sections of themselves. This process is called 'crossing-over' and implies the mutual transfer of genetic material. The chiasma is a scientifically proven act of total merging between components that happen to meet and assimilate. In this case, the transformation happens when two unlikely and unlike entities converge, and a new structure is shaped out of their shared compromise. In fact, the process of chromosomal crossover is effective only when it involves non-sister chromatids, those with a divergent genetic material.

Following the movement of blood through the body, this glossary is carried all the way up to the brain cells, to the language of medicine and to the 'optic chiasm'. This name stands for the area of the cerebrum where some of the optic nerves from one eye partially cross the other's. Immediately below the hypothalamus, an undulating X-shaped structure connects retinas to where the elaboration of images is happening in the brain; optic fibres to the field of vision. Here right and left optic nerves meet, and are the site where visual data is collected, mixed and dispatched to the brain. The optic chiasm allows us to see.

According to phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the chiasm refers not only to the idea of perceiving things with the eyes, but also to the mental elaboration of images and experience. In his book *The Visible and the Invisible* he affirmed that: 'The chiasm, reversibility is the idea that every perception doubled with a counter-perception...is an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens. Speaking-

listening, seeing-being seen, perceiving-being perceived [...] Activity = passivity. [...] There is a body of the mind, and a mind of the body and a chiasm between them.’[11]

If every existing thing can be said to be related to and modified by the surrounding things of the world, if bodies and minds are in a constant state of unsettling communication, then the act of ‘giving and receiving in return’ may be defined as the habitual action which is inherent to the human condition. The concept of ‘exchange’ can be developed in an infinite progression of associations, being one of the sub-stratum that glues the layers of reality together.

The term goes beyond exact description and appears to be far too unwieldy to be described or told, yet contains distinct ideas within its many permutations. At the end of this process, the dictionary definition is left behind, while the meaning of the word has been irreversibly enriched by the flow of its expansions.

[1] ‘exchange’ in *Oxford Dictionary of English*, New York, 2010.

[2] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London, 1968, p.29.

[3] ‘change’ in *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, London, 1966.

[4] ‘ex-’ at wiktionary.org, accessed 19/02/2014

[5] Madonna Gauding, *The Signs and the Symbols, Bible: The Definitive Guide to Mysterious Markings*, London, 2009, p.34.

[6] James Caswell and Jenise Amanda Ramos, *Saints and Sinners: Mexican Devotional Art*, Los Angeles, 2006.

[7] Rudolf Koch, *The Book of Signs*, New York, 2013.

[8] Plato, *The Timaeus and the Critias*, Washington, 1994, p.125.

[9] ‘chiasmus’ in *Origins*, London, 1966.

[10] Oxford University Press, Bible: Matthew 19:30.

[11] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: followed by working notes*, Evanston, 1973, pp.260–65.