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# Why Altruism Is Impossible...And Ubiquitous

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# Why Altruism Is Impossible . . . and Ubiquitous

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Deeply held commitments to individualism, atomism, and egoism have moved psychology to underestimate the frequency and significance of altruism and to seek explanations of examples of altruism that are based in the self-interested motives of the altruists. In this article, I review evidence that altruism is pervasive and discuss the conditions that promote its development in children and its display in adults. However, I suggest that there is nothing natural or inevitable about the pervasiveness of altruism—that large-scale cultural influences that regulate social relations and contribute to establishing the boundaries between self and other can have profound effects on altruism. The contemporary United States, with its emphasis on market relations between free and autonomous individuals, exemplifies the cultural conditions least conducive to altruism.

Historically, psychology has been guided by several theoretical presumptions that are so deep and pervasive that they are rarely noticed. These presumptions can be identified as methodological individualism, psychological atomism, egoism, and naturalism. Together, these presumptions imply that the proper unit for scientific analysis is the individual (methodological individualism), that the boundaries between different individuals are clear and distinct (psychological atomism), that individuals are interested primarily, if not exclusively, in themselves (egoism), and that all of this is “natural,” is nature’s way. Although psychology is certainly not unique among the human sciences in these presumptions, there is virtually no major area of psychology that is untouched by them.<sup>1</sup> These presumptions figure prominently when psychologists confront the phenomenon of altruism. The apparent fact that people will (sometimes, often, occasionally) act to

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serve the interests of others, even at substantial cost to themselves, becomes a puzzle that demands investigation and explanation. The very definition of altruism (“devotion to the interests of others; opposed to egoism,” as one dictionary has it) depends on these theoretical presumptions. If people were not psychological atoms, dedicated to their own interests—if the boundaries between self and other were not clear and distinct—altruism as a distinct phenomenon might not even exist. But because of these presumptions, it does exist and so must be explained.

Or better, it must be explained away. In biology, it may be explained away by means of the “selfish gene” and the concepts of kin selection, inclusive fitness, and reciprocal altruism that accompany selfish-gene theory.<sup>2</sup> In economics, it may be explained away by the tautological notion of “preference maximization,” which assumes that all choices maximize the preferences of the individuals who make them so that “it is ordinarily both convenient and reasonable for economics to . . . treat the individual as satisfying his preferences without dealing explicitly with the possibility that his preferences include a taste for helping other people.”<sup>3</sup> In psychology, it may be explained away by appeal to similarly tautological notions such as mutual reinforcement. In all such cases, the operating principle is that for altruism to occur, there simply must be something in it for the altruist and, further, that something must be not merely an incidental byproduct of the altruistic act but its cause. Said another way, it is not good enough to claim that when individuals engage in altruistic acts, they also produce benefits for themselves. Instead, the claim must be that when people behave altruistically, it is because of the personal benefits derived from these acts. In the oft-quoted words of Michael Ghiselin, “Scratch an altruist and watch a hypocrite bleed.”<sup>4</sup>

The net result of these views in the various human sciences is to make the presumption of egoism virtually unfalsifiable. Empirical evidence to document claims of egoism is rarely required. Reinterpretations of apparently altruistic acts in terms of their “real” egoistic causes are generated without constraint and accepted without careful scrutiny. Coupled with a more general cultural attitude that identifies cynicism with realism and sophistication, this orientation of the human sciences virtually guarantees that acts of altruism will not be accepted on their face.<sup>5</sup> Explanation of any social phenomenon that stops at altruism without unpacking the egoistic motives underlying it will be regarded as incomplete at best.

Within psychology, research on altruism is usually consistent with the theoretical presumptions I have identified. When examples of apparent altruism (e.g., children helping one another in play settings, adults coming to the aid of a stranger in distress) are subjected to research scrutiny, one of a handful of strategies is usually employed.

Perhaps researchers attempt to uncover the “actual” selfish motives that the altruistic acts serve. Failing that, they attempt to uncover some mechanism (socialization, Freudian defense) that underlies it because it could not be the result, say, of rational deliberation on the part of the actor. Failing that, this act may be accepted on its face, but regarded as developmentally primitive, something immature that the actors will outgrow.<sup>6</sup> Finally, failing that, the very concept of altruism in general may be subjected to an analysis in terms of some self-interested concept like reinforcement.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of these strategies for explaining away altruism, a significant phenomenon is submerged. And as the presumptions and theories from the human sciences become the intellectual currency of the culture at large, little effort is made to appeal to altruistic motives or social concerns in efforts to get people to do the right thing in their day-to-day life. Instead, appeals are made that show how one or another seemingly altruistic act will serve the long-term interests of the actors. Appeals are made for social support for prenatal care for poor women not because it is right, but because it will cost less than later intensive medical care for their infants. Appeals are made to combat child and wife abuse not because they are evil, but because domestic abuse costs employers millions of dollars in absenteeism and lowered job productivity. Appeals are made to improve urban education not because everyone in a society like ours should be literate, but because illiteracy costs all of us in welfare payments, unemployment benefits, and high crime rates.<sup>8</sup> When appeals to self-interest are believed to be the only appeals that have any legitimacy, people begin to evaluate their own options and possibilities from within an egoistic calculus. The result is that the calculus of self-interest becomes self-fulfilling. As Jerome Kagan has said, “So many people have come to accept the truth of that assumption [of self-interest as the only interest] that the average person now treats it as a natural law.”<sup>9</sup>

I intend to challenge some of these presumptions by taking altruism seriously. I will review briefly the empirical research and theoretical claims of others who take altruism seriously, and I will outline what is known about the social conditions that seem to promote altruism. In the course of this article, it should become apparent that under a different set of presumptions—presumptions that challenge individualism, atomism, and egoism—altruism becomes not impossible but ubiquitous.

## Examples of Altruism

The phenomena that provoke discussions of altruism range from the dramatic to the mundane. In the former category are examples of people who put themselves in great physical danger to assist others,

whether to save them from drowning or to pull them from a burning building. One recent account of such dramatic altruists is Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner's discussion of people who helped hide and save Jews during the Nazi holocaust.<sup>10</sup> A striking finding is that these life-saving altruists typically did not think they were doing anything unusual or heroic; they were doing what anyone would do. Also in the "dramatic" category is a voluminous line of research provoked by a failure of altruism. This research, on bystander intervention and bystander apathy, was begun as a result of a well-publicized incident in New York in which a woman was beaten to death as dozens of neighbors looked on from their apartment windows. Bibb Latane and John Darley, among others, attempted to bring this phenomenon into the laboratory to determine the variables that affect the likelihood of intervention.<sup>11</sup> They found that the likelihood of intervention decreases as the number of people who might intervene increases, as the physical proximity of the victim decreases, as the anonymity of the observers increases, as the familiarity of the victim decreases, and as the similarity of the victim to the observer decreases. People are much more likely to help in small towns than in big cities, they are much more likely to help people they know than strangers, they are much more likely to help people who are like them (in race, class, ethnicity) than people who are not, and they are much more likely to help if they are the only ones around. What is sometimes lost in all this analytical detail, however, is that most of the time, people do help. For example, in one series of studies that investigated the likelihood that young children and adolescents would come to the aid of an injured victim, fully 80 percent of subjects provided help.<sup>12</sup> So although people do not always help, they usually do.

In the category of more mundane acts of altruism are instances of giving to charity. Survey data indicate that more than 90 percent of Americans give to charity (more than 20 million American families give 5% or more of their incomes), and almost 50 percent do some kind of volunteer work.<sup>13</sup> In what may be the classic study of giving, Richard Titmuss surveyed 4,000 blood donors in England and found that only a small percentage of the donors expected to get anything—either directly or indirectly—in return. The language they used to explain their behavior was a moral language emphasizing responsibility and obligation rather than interest or egoism. Titmuss also observed that in nations like the United States, where "donors" could sell their blood rather than giving it, the language of interest came to replace the language of responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to these examples of altruism, there are many examples of related phenomena—of sharing resources and cooperating on projects when neither is required by the situation, indeed even when the situation mitigates against cooperation or sharing. A classic example

of a situation that pits cooperation against self-interest is found in game theory, specifically in what is called the Prisoner's Dilemma. In a classic Prisoner's Dilemma, each of two players may choose either to cooperate or to defect, and points are awarded to each based on his or her choices. Each player will do best if he or she defects and the other cooperates, and both players will do better if they both cooperate than if they both defect. The logic of the game dictates that unless the game has multiple turns, so that players can retaliate for defections, the only rational move for either player is defection. The result is that both players end up worse off than they would if they had cooperated.

In a game with multiple turns, however, cooperation can emerge as the dominant (i.e., most successful) strategy. Studies of the Prisoner's Dilemma have been used by Robert Axelrod and others to suggest the structural conditions necessary (principally, the possibility of retaliation for noncooperation) for cooperation to emerge among self-interested individuals.<sup>15</sup> However, recent research shows that many of these conditions are actually unnecessary. In Prisoner's Dilemma-like situations, subjects cooperated even when the games involved only one turn and their own choices were made anonymously. They cooperated even when cooperation could gain them nothing and could cost them substantially. The critical determinant of whether cooperation occurred was whether the people playing the game had an opportunity to communicate with one another prior to making their choices. Even brief group discussion was sufficient to engender in most subjects enough group identification and group solidarity that they felt bound to choose with group, not individual, interests in mind.<sup>16</sup> What this recent finding suggests is that Prisoner's Dilemma defections will reliably occur only when participants in a game are deprived of any opportunity to form any social bond. The presumptions of individualism, atomism, and egoism may have blinded previous investigators to the powerful effects of social solidarity and led to experiments conducted in a context in which solidarity could not possibly form. It appears that if solidarity can form, it will, and the logic of self-interest will be submerged as a result.

Much of the research that has been done on cooperation and sharing has been done with children in school settings. Although results tend to vary with age, children do a substantial amount of spontaneous cooperating and sharing, and it is not very difficult to induce children to cooperate and share still more.<sup>17</sup> Because the typical classroom is not set up to encourage cooperation (children are required to work independently, social interaction among students is regarded as disruptive behavior, and teachers often use competitive incentives), it is all the more remarkable that it appears.

Studies of cooperation, of sharing, and of helping even among preschool children, done both in the laboratory and in the home, demonstrate high frequencies of cooperation and sharing. In one such study, children between the ages of 3 and 7 were observed in play situations in which opportunities to help, comfort, or share with another child were possible. In the laboratory, more than half of the children studied displayed at least one of these prosocial behaviors during a 40-minute observation period. During a similar observation period in the home, almost 90 percent of the children acted selflessly.<sup>18</sup> Several other studies have produced similar results.<sup>19</sup>

Taken together, these phenomena, and many others like them, make it clear that altruistic behavior, whether dramatic or mundane, is not the least bit unusual. Helping, comforting, sharing, and cooperating occur among children and adults. They occur in school and in the home. They occur among acquaintances and among strangers. Although such behavior does not always occur, it occurs sufficiently frequently, in sufficiently diverse settings, that to deny the existence of genuine altruism requires extraordinary acts of creative interpretation.

With all these diverse examples, I have yet to mention the class of altruistic behavior that is most pervasive—the behavior that occurs among members of a family. The subdiscipline of evolutionary biology known as sociobiology was essentially created to explain how these blatant and ubiquitous acts of self-sacrifice among family members can be reconciled with a general theory (natural selection) whose logic seems to demand selfishness.<sup>20</sup> Selfish genes, inclusive fitness, and kin selection are all postulated to show that deep down, self-sacrifice is really selfish. Sociobiology has been subject to substantial scrutiny and criticism, especially when it is applied to human behavior, but this is not the place to rehearse the arguments.<sup>21</sup> Leaving debates about sociobiology aside, if altruism is understood to mean “devotion to the interests of others,” one glance at the behavior of families should convince us that it is everywhere.

### Variables Affecting Altruism

Given that altruism does indeed occur, what can be said about the variables that influence its occurrence? Research on this topic has looked both at the individual and at the social context. It has explored whether altruism might be related to traits of character or personality and how it is affected by transient emotional or motivational states. It has examined in detail the socialization process for factors in the process of social development that might promote altruism. The literature is too voluminous to review here.<sup>22</sup> Thus, my discussion will be cursory, with an emphasis in the next section on what research in social development suggests are the necessary ingredients of altruism and the socialization experiences that promote it.



One variable that seems positively related to altruism and other forms of prosocial behavior is self-esteem. Although the literature is equivocal, most research has found that people—adults and children—with a positive self-concept are more likely to be helpful than people whose self-esteem is weak.<sup>23</sup> If one is sure of oneself, it seems easier to extend oneself to others. However, there are exceptions to this generalization. People with an extremely high opinion of themselves may feel no need to be connected to others, and people with a low opinion of themselves may be helpful just to garner social approval.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it seems that just the right amount of self-esteem (whatever that might be) promotes altruism.

Still less clear is the relation of gender to altruism. In recent years, research on moral reasoning has led to the view that whereas men tend to be guided in their reasoning by an ethic of “rights,” women tend to be guided by an ethic of “care, connection, and responsibility.”<sup>25</sup> This difference in the criteria used for making moral judgments might lead one to suspect that women are more likely to be altruistic than men. However, research does not bear this expectation out. There are some studies in which women are more likely to help than men, but there are also studies in which the reverse is true, and there are many studies in which there seems to be no effect of gender.<sup>26</sup> And importantly, in one study of preschoolers, children who are presumably too young to have strongly developed gender roles, there were no observable gender differences in either helping, sharing, or moral reasoning.<sup>27</sup>

Two other variables that may be related to altruism are political and religious affiliation. In the political domain, there is some evidence that liberals score higher than conservatives on tests of moral reasoning, and that conservatives are more likely than liberals to hold the “just-world” view that people basically get what is coming to them.<sup>28</sup> These findings suggest potential differences in altruistic behavior, but I know of no studies that have found such differences. In the case of religion, many studies completed over the last 25 years have failed to find any relation between degree of religious conviction and a wide range of different kinds of altruistic activity.<sup>29</sup> One recent study, however, suggests that failures to find a relation between religious conviction and altruism may stem from measures of religious conviction that are too crude. Daniel Batson and colleagues distinguished among religious people those who see religion as a means to extrinsic ends, those who see it as an end in itself, and those who see it as a quest. Only among people in the latter group was helping positively related to religiosity.<sup>30</sup> Thus, if the relation between religious conviction and altruism is to be explored further, care must be taken to measure not only how religious individuals are, but what the content of their religious commitments is.

The only clear picture that emerges from the discussion thus far is that there is no clear picture. However, one variable that does seem to figure prominently in the degree of altruism people display is the extent to which potential altruists identify with the individuals or the group they will be helping. People are more inclined to help those who are perceived as similar to themselves than those who are perceived as different.<sup>31</sup> They are more likely to help members of their own racial or ethnic group than members of different groups.<sup>32</sup> Even when “groups” are established in the laboratory by means of a few minutes of discussion, the amount of group-serving, cooperative behavior is enhanced.<sup>33</sup> The anecdotal observation, confirmed by some empirical research, that people who live in small towns or rural settings are more likely to help than those who live in cities may in part be the result of group identification that small-town life makes possible and urban life prevents.<sup>34</sup> Altruistic acts that depend on group identification are susceptible to interpretations that suggest they are ultimately egoistic and self-interested, either by engendering future reciprocation (reciprocal altruism) or by deriving some benefits to one’s social standing. Although there are several studies that have tried with some success to rule these “ultimate self-interest” interpretations out, there seems to be an endless supply of new possibilities waiting in the wings to replace self-interest hypotheses that have been empirically eliminated.<sup>35</sup>

## Altruism and Socialization

Whenever a claim is made that some characteristic or other is “human nature,” attempts to evaluate the claim turn almost immediately to development. In light of the troika of presumptions about human nature with which I began this article—individualism, atomism, and egoism—researchers have paid a great deal of attention to the development of social behavior. If egoism is human nature, and positive social activity is a result of socialization, then we should expect to find that positive social behavior increases with development. If, however, there is something “natural” about positive social behavior, then we should see signs of it very early on. Although studies of development that have attempted to resolve this issue have been inconclusive, they have suggested what some of the requisite components of positive social behavior are, and what kinds of developmental experience seem to foster those components.<sup>36</sup>

In an influential account of the development of altruism, Martin Hoffman suggests that altruism has two requirements, one affective and one cognitive.<sup>37</sup> Genuine altruism requires empathy (affective) and perspective taking (cognitive). One’s distress at the distress of another can be direct and immediate. It is painful, for example, to

hear infants cry—even for other infants.<sup>38</sup> However, this empathy may not lead to altruism. Indeed, it may lead to escape if the affect is intense enough. For empathy to lead to altruism, it must be combined with perspective taking. To be able to feel what another is feeling (empathy) requires substantial understanding (perspective taking) of what the other is experiencing. Hoffman refers to this kind of affect combined with perspective taking as sympathy. According to Hoffman, children move from empathy to sympathy in stages as their cognitive sophistication increases.<sup>39</sup>

Although both empathy and perspective taking are necessary for altruism, neither is sufficient. One can experience intense distress at the distress of another, but without an accompanying understanding of the source and nature of the distress, one might act only to relieve the distress in oneself (e.g., by escaping) or act to try to relieve the distress of the other in a way that is entirely inappropriate. Similarly, one can have a thorough understanding of the perspective of the other but use this only to serve one's own interests (e.g., by avoiding a similar situation oneself). To behave altruistically, one must both understand what the other is experiencing and want to do something about it.

As I indicated above, research on altruism in children, both in laboratory settings and in the home, suggests that it is abundant.<sup>40</sup> Most 18-month-olds will share something with another person, and most children between 18 and 24 months will respond positively to another's distress. Thus, even before much of the requisite cognitive development has occurred, instances of altruism are common. However, there are also individual differences among children in altruism, and at least some evidence suggests that the different responses to others in distress when children are quite young can predict how these children will respond as much as 5 years later.<sup>41</sup> The existence of individual differences, together with the suggestion that early differences may be perpetuated, prompts one to investigate the socialization variables that may enhance or retard altruistic behavior.

The first place to look for socialization effects is at the relations between parents and children. Hoffman identified several child-rearing variables that affect the degree of altruism displayed by children.<sup>42</sup> First, parents can enhance altruism by engaging in altruistic behavior themselves. Second, parents can enhance altruism by using certain disciplinary techniques when their children are responsible for another's distress. By using what Hoffman calls "inductive," as opposed to punitive, discipline, a parent can turn a child's transgressions to good effect. Inductive discipline stresses the effects of the child's behavior on others, emphasizing long-range, perhaps unforeseen, effects, both psychological and physical, and steps that may be taken to ameliorate the consequences of the child's transgression. Such disciplinary techniques possess moral content; that is, the parent makes

clear that the child's actions not only had unfortunate effects, but that they were wrong. The constructive and reparative character of the induction seems to result in the child's internalization of the appropriate moral norm, making similar transgressions less likely in the future and spontaneous reparations more likely, should transgressions occur. In contrast with inductive discipline, discipline based on creating fear of future punishment, or discipline based on the assertion of parental power or on the direct withdrawal of parental love do not have salutary effects on the likelihood of future altruistic behavior. On Hoffman's account, inductive discipline succeeds in promoting altruism where other techniques fail because by emphasizing the plight of the victim the parent triggers empathic distress in the child. Other disciplinary techniques may also trigger distress, but the distress will be focused on the (future) plight of the self rather than on the victim. There is also some reason to believe that inductive discipline may promote altruism by encouraging children to reason about the moral significance of their actions, something that even young children seem able and willing to do.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to using inductive discipline, parents can promote altruism by providing whatever discipline they provide in a context of substantial parental affection. Persistent and abundant parental affection can reduce the child's focus or preoccupation with his or her own emotional needs, thus making it easier for sympathy and perspective taking to occur.

Although the home is certainly the central domain for socialization in childhood, it is not the only one. Much socialization occurs in the classroom. Cooperative learning and play settings in the classroom seem to enhance children's perspective-taking abilities.<sup>44</sup> They also seem to enhance self-esteem, which, as noted earlier, contributes to prosocial behavior.<sup>45</sup> Children with substantial experience cooperating in the classroom are more likely than other children to help others or to donate some of their resources to others.<sup>46</sup> Conversely, explicitly competitive classroom situations seem to reduce all of these prosocial effects.<sup>47</sup> There is also some evidence that in addition to providing opportunities for cooperation, schools can facilitate altruism by putting children into mixed-age groups.<sup>48</sup> Because children of different ages are expected to perform at different levels, mixing age groups discourages implicit competition. It also gives older children practice in perspective taking as they try to help the younger ones.

Friendship also positively influences prosocial behavior.<sup>49</sup> Studies of play in children from as young as 12 months to as old as 10 years indicate that turn taking and sharing are the rule. Despite the old Piagetian lore to the contrary, when young children speak as they play, the majority of their speech is social, not egocentric. The speech of each child is coordinated with the group's joint activities. As children

get older (ages 6–7), friendships seem to be defined by strict reciprocity, but by the time they reach age 9 or 10, reciprocity is replaced by a richer understanding of mutual commitment and obligation in which children acknowledge a principle much like “from each according to his abilities and to each according to his needs.” The friendship becomes a unit that is different from (more than) the individual needs and wants of the participants. At this age, children seem to realize that friendships take work and long-term commitment. The children seem no longer to see themselves (if they ever did) as the psychological atoms that most psychological theories presume.

None of these findings should come as much of a surprise. Millennia ago, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observed that it is hard to be good—that being good takes practice. This practice occurs in the routine activities of daily life. If daily life is properly structured, being good becomes automatic. The literature on socialization and altruism confirms Aristotle’s views by showing that when the home and the classroom are structured to give the child practice in prosocial behavior, such behavior becomes much more likely.

If practice at being good is a good thing, it seems natural to do whatever one can to encourage children to practice. This has led some investigators to study the effects of reward for prosocial behavior. Because rewards can be used effectively in general to strengthen desired behavior, it seems only natural to use them to encourage cooperation or altruism. It seems especially natural if one believes that such behavior occurs only when it serves the interests of the actor. A system of rewards for prosocial behavior can be seen as assuring that it will be in the individual’s interests to be good.

The results of such studies paint a coherent picture. When rewards are contingent on various forms of prosocial behavior, they increase the frequency of the behavior—as long as the rewards continue to be present. If the rewards are withdrawn, the prosocial behavior decreases. Thus, unless one expects contingent rewards for prosocial behavior to be a permanent and ubiquitous part of the social scene, one cannot rely on them to be the primary source of prosocial behavior. We can understand such results from the framework provided by attribution theory.<sup>50</sup> Imagine a child who helps a playmate in distress. The child might seek to explain his or her helping behavior—to make a causal attribution. If no rewards are present, likely causal attributions would involve the state of distress of the victim, the understanding that helping is the right thing to do, and other explanations that focus on factors intrinsic to the act of helping. But the presence of rewards offers an alternative, and apparently dominant, causal candidate. “I did it for the reward,” the child might say to him- or herself. With that understanding of his or her motivation, it would come as no surprise if altruistic acts were not forthcoming when rewards were not

available. This is just a particular class of a much more general and well-documented phenomenon—the undermining of intrinsic motivation by extrinsic rewards.<sup>51</sup>

For example, in one study, second and third graders who were given rewards for helping were less likely to explain their own behavior in terms of intrinsic motivation to help than were children who did not receive rewards.<sup>52</sup> In another study, children were praised (social reward) or merely told that they were helpful people for making donations to another. Only in the latter case was the likelihood of donation high in a subsequent follow-up study.<sup>53</sup> In another study of elementary school children, it was found that their mothers' tendency to use rewards as socialization tools was negatively correlated with the likelihood that the children would help when unobserved in free-play settings.<sup>54</sup> Results similar to these have been obtained with adult subjects. The presence of extrinsic rewards decreased their perception of themselves as altruistic and decreased the likelihood that they would help again at a later time without rewards. Conversely, experimenter interventions that focused on the altruistic nature of the subjects increased the likelihood of future altruistic behavior.<sup>55</sup>

The literature on the use of rewards to promote altruism should remind the reader of where this article began. It began with a set of presumptions that, taken together, made genuine altruism seem impossible. Because of the inherently atomistic, self-interested character of human nature, there simply had to be something in it for the altruist. Not only that, but that “something” that served self-interest had to be the cause of the altruistic act. In other words, it would not do to suggest that although altruists get satisfaction from their altruistic acts, that is not the reason they do them—that they do them because they are the right things to do, and the satisfaction is a bonus. From within the presumptions of atomism and egoism, such an account is naive at best. The actors themselves may believe that their acts are motivated by obligation, responsibility, and commitment, but what really keeps them going is some kind of direct payoff. Thinking like this makes it perfectly natural to use extrinsic rewards to beef up the payoff for altruistic acts; extrinsic rewards are seen as making only a quantitative change in the incentive structure of a situation, not a qualitative one.

When theorists who hold the view that genuine altruism is impossible are presented with examples of altruism, they try to explain them by appealing to one or another mechanism of self-interest. Appeals to kin selection and inclusive fitness are the way sociobiology handles altruism toward offspring or other genetic relatives. Reciprocal altruism is one way sociobiologists (and other social scientists) handle the fact that altruism is much more likely among people who know one another or who are alike in some significant way. The rewarding power

of praise and social approval is another way such acts of altruism are handled. And when empathy (or sympathy) is introduced as an essential ingredient of altruistic behavior, the atomists suggest that the altruist acts only to relieve the distress that is created by his or her empathy.

In principle, one could test these various self-interest-based alternatives to genuine altruism by creating experimental situations in which genuinely altruistic motives and self-interested motives will push people to behave differently. Batson and his associates have been doing precisely this for the last several years.<sup>56</sup> Thus, for example, Batson has provided evidence that empathy and personal distress at the plight of another are actually distinct and essentially independent affective states. This finding makes the claim that empathy-based altruism is really motivated by the relief of personal distress more difficult to sustain. He has also shown that the mood of altruistic actors is affected by whether or not the victim actually gains relief from his or her unfortunate situation and not by whether they happen to have been the agents responsible for that relief. This finding makes the claim that altruism is really only the pursuit of social approval and status more difficult to sustain.

Although careful, analytic experiments can be done to test particular egoistic explanations of altruistic behavior, there seems to be an endless supply of such explanations. Egoistic accounts of altruism will continue to sprout, like weeds, and investigators will face the task of evaluating and rejecting them, one by one, indefinitely unless the ground can be replowed and some of the presumptions that dominate the human sciences be replaced. I turn to an examination of this possibility next.

## On the Different Modes of Social Relations

A likely reason why the presumptions of modern social science—individualism, atomism, and egoism—have been so pervasively and uncritically embraced is that they conjure up a picture of human beings and social life that is very much like the life that most people live in modern, Western societies. The ideology of the marketplace exhorts people to pursue their own interests and trust in the system to take care of social welfare in general. The ideology of rights protects people, as autonomous individuals, from having to submit to the will of the majority. And much of the ideology explicit or implicit in pop psychology encourages people to aspire to autonomy and independence—to find out, and to do, what is right for them and not worry so much about the consequences for others. The extent to which modern life has actually been influenced by the individualist presumptions of the social sciences, as opposed to just influencing them, is an interesting question, best left for another place. For now, it is sufficient to note that

a Western social scientist who casually observes the character of the lives that surround him or her would have little reason even to investigate these individualist presumptions, let alone cast about for an alternative.

A way out of this myopia is through cross-cultural investigation, and there is of course a long history of cross-cultural research in the social sciences. But there is no guarantee that a cross-cultural perspective will eliminate the bedrock presumption that the many and varied cultural proscriptions and prescriptions one observes are simply laid on top of a human nature that is universal. It is possible to argue, in other words, that although different cultures may induce people to behave more altruistically than our culture does, such cultures are only papering over basic human nature more than we do.

Although this view may never have been extremely plausible, it was certainly extremely popular, at least among psychologists who took as their task the discovery of the universals of human nature. The emergence of a new subdiscipline in the social sciences—some call it “cultural psychology”—has challenged this view by suggesting that the effects of culture do not merely paper over the human nature that lies underneath, but instead penetrate all the way down, affecting not only what people take to be self-interest, and what they will do to serve self-interest, but even what they take to be a self.<sup>57</sup> For example, Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama have recently shown that the boundaries that separate the self from others are very much culture-specific.<sup>58</sup> In cultures like that of the United States, the self is construed as an independent entity. Independence, autonomy, and “self-actualization” are prized, and the values and preferences of each individual are given a status independent of the values and preferences of others. The individualist presumptions of social science are tailor-made for a self like this. In other cultures, even industrial cultures like Japan, the self is construed as an interdependent entity. Significant others form a part of the self, and their values and preferences are, in significant respects, one’s own. The Japanese term *sunao*, used to label a trait that parents nurture and value in their children, “assumes cooperation to be an act of affirmation of the self.”<sup>59</sup> In cultures like this, people are not faced with the choice between self-interest and altruism, at least not in the way that Americans face it. Also, the need to explain away altruism evaporates as the distinction between doing something because it makes you feel better and doing it because it makes the other feel better blurs. If the other is part of you, then acts of altruism become simultaneously impossible and ubiquitous. They become impossible because “devotion to the interests of others” is not “opposed to egoism,” and they become ubiquitous because devotion to the interests of others is a part of everyone’s everyday life. In cultures like this, many of the conflicts Americans routinely face between doing the



right thing and doing the self-interested thing also evaporate. No doubt they are replaced by different conflicts, but these different conflicts will be reflections of fundamentally different selves, with fundamentally different notions of value and of self-interest.

Markus and Kitayama discuss several essential differences between the independent self and the interdependent self, many of which have implications for the study of altruism. For the independent self, relations with others are typically means to individual ends. This is what opens up all acts of altruism to egoistic interpretation. In contrast, to the interdependent self, relations with others are ends in themselves. The key properties of the independent self are internal and private—such psychological entities as abilities, thoughts, and feelings. In contrast, the key properties of the interdependent self are public—such social entities as roles, status, and social relations. The key tasks for the independent self are to be unique, to express oneself, and to pursue one's personal goals. The key tasks of the interdependent self are to belong, to fit in, to occupy one's proper place, and to promote the goals of others. Success for the independent self comes from self-expression and self-realization, whereas for the interdependent self, it comes from self-restraint and adjustment to the demands of social harmony. It may seem that adopting an interdependent construal of the self means giving up the desire for agency and for achievement. But Markus and Kitayama point out that it need not mean either. Agency (control) and achievement may be seen as extremely important and valuable—in the service, however, of group, rather than individual, goals.

It should be obvious that in a culture characterized by an interdependent construal of the self, acts of altruism become so unremarkable that they almost disappear as a category that is distinct from self-interested acts. Attempts to distinguish selfish from unselfish motives for prosocial acts become almost nonsensical. Research like this opens up the presumptions of modern social science to careful inspection by showing just how culturally specific they are. It also begs for researchers to evaluate the extent to which cultural influences on prosocial behavior dominate the more individual influences that psychologists are much more accustomed to searching for.

Markus and Kitayama establish a sharp contrast between extreme individualism, on the one hand, and extreme "communitarianism," on the other, and it is possible that one can find cultures in which people live at one or the other extreme in all domains of their lives. What seems more plausible, however, even in extremely individualist cultures like ours, is that the same individual lives by different rules in different domains, that the same individual can be (appropriately) more or less individualistic depending on the setting in which actions must be chosen. Alan Fiske has recently fleshed out this possibility by

suggesting that there are four fundamentally different rule systems that capture virtually all the forms of social interaction one observes in all cultures.<sup>60</sup> What distinguishes cultures from one another is the domains in which each of these rule systems operates. Some of these rule systems are likely to encourage interdependent selves, and others, independent selves. Thus, the kind of self one has may depend on which of these rule systems is dominant in one's culture.

Fiske refers to the four rule systems as *communal sharing*, *authority ranking*, *equality matching*, and *market pricing*. The communal sharing rule system makes a fundamental distinction between us and them, that is, between members and nonmembers of the community. All individuals within the community are regarded as equivalent to one another and as distinct from all those outside the community. In a communal sharing relation, people treat material objects as things that all members of the group hold in common. People take what they need and contribute what they can, and no one keeps score. In cultures that are dominated by communal-sharing relations, land tends to be freely available for use by anyone who needs it, work tends to be done collectively, and the products of the work are freely available. Decisions tend to be made by consensus. In cultures like ours, where communal sharing is not the dominant form of social life, it nevertheless is common in some domains, like the family. For many, a significant goal is to have communal sharing relations extend outside the family to larger units of the social world—to friends, to neighbors, to people of the same faith, or with the same ethical commitments. Within members of the group—however the group is defined and however large it gets—actions are meant to be governed by an ethic of care and responsibility, and people are expected to treat one another with kindness (in both senses of the word; as Fiske points out, people are expected to treat members of their own kind with kindness). Within a social network run by principles of communal sharing, the boundaries between self and other will be fuzzy, and thus, distinguishing between egoism and altruism will be difficult and perhaps pointless. People who grow up in cultures dominated by communal sharing seem to reason quite differently than do people in U.S. culture about which kinds of prosocial acts require justifications and which kinds of justifications are appropriate.<sup>61</sup>

Authority ranking, as the name implies, ranks people relative to one another. Some people are better than (higher than, more important than) others. Social groups that run by authority-ranking rules tend to be rather rigid, hierarchical, and authoritarian. People expect to be treated by (and to treat) others in ways that are entirely determined by their relative positions in the rankings. The material goods they get, and what they have to do to get them, the respect and admiration they receive from others, and what they have to give others in

return all are determined by their relative social position. Although there are some cultures that are dominated by this form of social organization, U.S. culture obviously is not, although one sees it in the military, in industry, in some religious groups, in some families, and in other settings where there is a clear chain of command. In a domain ruled by authority ranking, who does what, who gets what, and how decisions are made will be very different than they are in a domain ruled by communal sharing. Altruistic behavior may again be hard to discern, not because the boundaries between self and other are fuzzy, but because the duties and obligations specified by one's social position may be so well detailed that altruism may never be required as a motive nor empathy as a triggering affect.

Equality-matching rules of social interaction focus on equity, reciprocity, and fairness. In contrast to communal sharing, in which people give as they are able and take as they need, and in contrast to authority ranking, in which people give and take according to their established social positions, equality-matching systems turn on notions of fair compensation for effort and appropriate reciprocation for acts of kindness. In contrast to the marketplace, with which we are so familiar, the objective of exchange is not profit, but equity, and the mechanism of exchange is not contract, but trust. People take turns and try to give back what they get—neither more (for that might be either insulting or foolish) nor less (for that would be a moral violation). Thus, for example, when people reciprocate for dinner parties, their objective (if they are operating within the spirit of an equality-matching system) is to offer hospitality that will be essentially equivalent to what they received. Reciprocation that is too spartan or informal will insult their former hosts, whereas reciprocation that is too lavish will embarrass them. Equity, not superiority, and matching, not profiting, are the goals.

There are countless examples of equality-matching social relations across a wide range of cultures. People help their neighbors raise buildings or harvest crops and receive reciprocation at another time. People send one another Christmas cards and gifts. Senators and congresspeople vote for one another's pet legislation. Friends take turns baby-sitting for one another's children. In all such cases, the objective seems to be equality. In some instances, people go so far to insure equality that they give back exactly the same things that they have previously received.<sup>62</sup> The point of such exchanges, Fiske suggests, is not material gain, but rather to cement the equality-matching relation itself. Indeed, there is evidence that people will reject exchanges in which they benefit over their partners and prefer exchanges that are equitable.<sup>63</sup> In his very influential work on the nature of justice, John Rawls gives equality matching great prominence in suggesting that a system of equal distribution of wealth is what individuals would choose if they were forced to choose from behind a "veil of ignorance" that

concealed what their position would be when society was constructed and wealth was distributed.<sup>64</sup>

Several studies of the development of reciprocity in children suggest that a sensitivity to equality-matching relations is present fairly early. Toddlers have been shown to share toys with one another based on whether the other toddler previously shared with them.<sup>65</sup> In a study in which 3–5-year-old children had the opportunity to share food with friends or acquaintances, although there were few spontaneous offers to share, children usually responded positively to the requests of others. And in subsequent tests, children's willingness to share was very much dependent on how their requests for food had been treated previously.<sup>66</sup> Finally, in another study, first graders evaluated acts of positive reciprocation more highly than acts of altruism, suggesting that for them, equity may be more highly valued than charity.<sup>67</sup>

As in the case of communal sharing and authority ranking, it is difficult to know how to fit altruistic behavior into a social scheme run by equality-matching rules. If, indeed, equality matching is important to people precisely because it helps strengthen the relation of which it is a characteristic, then offering help to others can be understood as serving the self. This will be true so long as equality matching is a goal of a social relation. It does not follow from this, of course, that one's reasons for helping or sharing or giving actually are self-serving. It is just that in a system that is equity based, any actions that serve the needs of another will also serve the self, so long as all participants are playing by the same rules. What this implies is that the distinction between altruistic and egoistic is not especially helpful in an equality-matching context.

The final social rule system discussed by Fiske, the one to which modern Americans are perhaps most accustomed, is the market-pricing system. Market pricing is what governs relations in the market, where it is understood that people are interested not in equity, but in gain, and where the principal lubricant of exchange is not trust, but contract. Market pricing is enormously facilitated by (perhaps even made possible by) a medium of exchange like money. Money makes it possible for people to engage in transactions anonymously and by long distance. As Fiske puts it, transactions need leave no traces because they can be paid for there and then. There is no need to keep score and no need to expect explicit and direct reciprocation. The market as a system enables more indirect reciprocation. Buyers do not require that the people who sell to them turn around and buy from them. All that is required is that there be some (anonymous) buyers for every seller. Money also makes it possible to exchange things that seem incomparable to one another based on their intrinsic properties. So long as each thing can be given a dollar value, a price, then things that are intrinsically quite different can be regarded as equivalent if

they have the same price. This permits a kind of fluidity and freedom in social relations that the other types of social rules do not. For example, in an equality-matching framework, how does one go about deciding whether any reciprocation for a dinner invitation except a return dinner invitation is equitable? Because the value of such social acts is not just their price—indeed, may be totally unrelated to their price—the only way to assure equity is to reciprocate in kind. With market pricing and a medium of exchange, this is no longer necessary. Value is price, everything has a price, and everything can be exchanged.

It is the market-pricing system of social relations to which the individualist, egoist presumptions of social science seem especially well suited. This may not be an inevitable characteristic of market-pricing social rules. However, because the institution that embodies those rules—the market—is based on the presumption that the only point of exchange is profit, it is quite likely that self-interest will appear to rule. Furthermore, in addition to being guided by the ideology of self-interest, market exchange makes possible transactions between anonymous agents, thereby decreasing the chances that any agent will even know the interests of the people with whom he or she interacts, let alone cater to them. Thus, people are not expected or supposed to be altruistic in market transactions, and if they nevertheless want to be, they probably will not know how to do it.

It is hardly surprising that if the market relations are taken as the model for social relations, investigators will be extremely suspicious of apparent acts of altruism and will be on the lookout for the selfish interests that are “actually” being served. That is, a certain amount of tunnel vision will have been created by the investigators’ theoretical presumptions. But there is more going on than mere theory-guided, selective perception of the world. If people actually live in a world that is dominated by market relations, it becomes much less likely that they will engage in genuine acts of altruism. There are some data that suggest that even though people are not, in general, inclined to act egoistically, they will do so when they think they are being exploited. And the marketplace, in explicitly sanctioning the unbridled pursuit of self-interest (and the caveat emptor that accompanies it), permits and even encourages exploitation. So in a society dominated by market pricing, people may be utterly egoistic—in self-defense. The combination of a social science that is prepared to see only egoism and social institutions that are prepared to foster only egoism virtually guarantees that egoism is all that the society will get.

## Changing Social Structures and Changing Social Values

The critical idea suggested in the work of Fiske and of Markus and Kitayama is that the frequency of behavior that we might regard as

altruistic is likely to depend more on the social structures within which people live than on any essential and universal characteristics of human nature. If people live in societies in which the boundaries between self and other are not sharp, and the rules of social interaction emphasize sharing or equity, they will behave quite differently from those in societies that make clear distinctions between self and other and emphasize the pursuit of self-interest. Said another way, egoists are made, not born. The devotion to self-interest is not a “natural” part of human nature, but it can be a part of human nature under the right conditions. To see the egoist in full flower, one needs a society organized around an unfettered market, from which social institutions that might restrict exchange have been systematically eliminated. The market-pricing system is not made possible by egoists; rather, it makes egoists possible. The implications of this idea for an account of social behavior are significant. Remember, in the eyes of social science, the presumptions of individualism, atomism, and egoism are not mere descriptions of particular points and places in history and culture. They are scientific laws, fundamental truths about the human organism and the human condition. One way of thinking about laws in general is as constraints on human activities. The law of gravity is one such constraint; it keeps people from flying about uncontrollably. The law that prohibits going through red lights is another such constraint; it keeps people from driving their cars in whatever way they like. But these two kinds of “laws” are obviously very different. The constraint imposed by gravity is not human made, not self-imposed, and it cannot be repealed no matter how much people want to repeal it. The constraint on going through red lights, in contrast, is self-imposed and easily repealed.

Which of these kinds of constraints are the individualism, atomism, and egoism of social science? The implication of Fiske and of Markus and Kitayama is that they are clearly like traffic laws, not gravity. All the features of society that make egoism ring true are human creations—creations that could be different, that indeed are different in different cultures, and may once have been different in our own.<sup>68</sup> One could imagine society moving in the future in directions that undercut some of the conditions on which egoism depends. One could also imagine society moving in directions that permit the extension of egoism to aspects of human life, like marriage and child rearing, that they presently do not pervade. But either of these moves, should they develop, will be the product of human discretion, not of natural necessity.

If the laws of egoism are like traffic laws rather than laws of gravity, they are in need of justification or defense. Gravity requires no defense; it simply is. Not so for traffic laws. We must defend the infringement on individual freedom they represent. It must be argued that this set of traffic laws, and not some other, is the right one. Such a

defense may not be difficult to make, but it will appeal to such things as values and morals; it will depend on some understanding of what is good for people and what is good for society. The rules of market pricing can be defended in the same way. People can attempt to justify them by appealing to human rights, freedoms, and entitlements. People can attempt to justify them by appealing to the goods, both social and individual, that will derive from a market-pricing social system. That is to say, market pricing and egoism can be defended—or attacked—on moral grounds. But they cannot be defended as just another gravitational constraint on human activity.

In order for moral discourse about the logic of egoism, or of markets, to make any sense, people must be able to see that there are alternatives. Otherwise, moral discourse becomes idle drawing room conversation. In a society in which the market operates only in limited spheres of life, and other expectations, standards, and rules operate in other spheres, these other standards provide the concrete alternatives to the market that make moral discourse worthwhile. People can argue about whether this or that domain of life should run according to market principles or some other principles. In this connection, it has been suggested by several writers that late twentieth-century industrial societies are witnessing a spread of economic thinking to previously non-economic domains.<sup>69</sup> This “economic imperialism” has applied the logic of rational choice to family life, to education, to the law, and to political activity. Each time the scope of the market extends itself, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to envision an alternative to the logic of egoism. As a result, atomism and egoism become the only game in town; they become “laws of nature” by default.

I can illustrate the way in which economic imperialism threatens to subsume all other domains of life and the pursuit of different goals that these domains make possible by focusing on a study done by Daniel Kahneman, Jack Knetsch, and Richard Thaler.<sup>70</sup> The study concerned people’s judgments of fairness over a range of different hypothetical economic situations. Each of the situations was described, and people were asked to assess whether the behavior in question in each situation was fair or unfair. For example: A hardware store has been selling snow shovels for \$15. The morning after a large snow-storm, the store raises the price to \$20. Is this fair?

A market-pricing answer to this question is that yes, of course it is fair to charge \$20. More accurately, the market-pricing answer might be that “fairness” has nothing to do with it. The real question is, Is it profitable? And this question will have different answers in different circumstances. Now suppose one were operating from a non-market-pricing, or not purely market-pricing, perspective. Suppose that fairness implied a certain responsibility to meet the needs of the community and to honor the loyalty of one’s regular

customers. Suppose that fairness appealed to some moral principle that said one was entitled to a reasonable profit, but not to whatever the traffic would bear. From within this perspective, one might well decide that it was unfair to charge \$20 for the shovel, even if one could get away with it.

In the study, 82 percent of the respondents judged the \$20 price to be unfair, suggesting that the majority of people do not make decisions of this kind from within a purely market-pricing perspective.

Here is another example, a question with two variants:

A small photocopying shop has one employee who has worked in the shop for 6 months and earns \$9 per hour. Business continues to be satisfactory, but a factory in the area has recently closed and unemployment has increased. Other small shops have now hired reliable workers at \$7 per hour to perform jobs similar to those done by the photocopy shop employee. The owner of the photocopying shop reduces the employee's wage to \$7 per hour. Is this fair?

A small photocopying shop has one employee who has worked in the shop for 6 months and earns \$9 per hour. Business continues to be satisfactory, but a factory in the area has recently closed and unemployment has increased. Other small shops have now hired reliable workers at \$7 per hour to perform jobs similar to those done by the photocopy shop employee. The current employee leaves, and the owner of the photocopying shop decides to pay a replacement \$7 per hour. Is this fair?

Do these two questions evoke the same evaluation? From a purely economic perspective, the situations are equivalent. Bosses pay the lowest wage they can get away with. A supply of surplus labor enables them to lower the wages of current employees or replace them with unemployed people who will accept the lower wage. However, 83 percent of the respondents thought the first situation was unfair. This is not because they believed that working in a photocopying shop was simply worth \$9 per hour, because 73 percent of the respondents thought the second situation was fair. More likely, what was guiding people's judgments was a sense that a "fair wage" was determined by many things. One was the profit margin of the employer. Another was what the going wage was for similar work in the area. But a third was the wage history of the particular employees involved. That a person was earning \$9 per hour made that his "reference wage." Barring real economic hardships on the part of the employer, the reference wage could not fairly be reduced. It could certainly not be reduced just because other people out there were willing to work for a lower wage. That the reference wage was attached to the employee and not the job is clear from people's willingness to pay a lower wage for the same job if it went to a new employee.

It should not be concluded that the respondents in this study were antiboss or anticapitalist. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that it



was fair to increase prices or decrease wages if profits were being threatened, especially if the threat to profits came from circumstances outside the employer's control. In fact, respondents treated increases in profit as fair if they were the result not of increased prices or decreased wages but instead of a cheaper source of raw materials or a more efficient production process. In other words, producers and retailers were not required to pass their savings on to purchasers.

What people's responses to these examples point to is that the average person seems to think it is perfectly appropriate to apply moral standards in evaluating economic transactions. The market is not an amoral playing field in which anything that is legal is acceptable. The market is not a place in which the naked and unrestrained pursuit of self-interest is condoned. People may have come to expect the worst in the market, but they have not yet come to accept it. Instead of allowing economic considerations to encroach on the moral domain, the respondents in this study seem to insist that moral considerations—in this case, fairness—should encroach on the economic domain.

If people are willing to impose standards of fairness in the marketplace, as the respondents in this study clearly were, then perhaps my concern about economic imperialism is an idle one. Perhaps, but I do not think so. Standards of fairness must originate somewhere, and because there is no place for fairness within the domain of the market (and its accompanying market-pricing ideology), these standards must be developed in other domains. It seems likely that they are developed, encouraged, and sustained in various nonmarket institutions like the family, the local community, the school, and the church. These standards are then imported, at least by some people, into market situations. So long as these nonmarket institutions retain their noneconomic character and purpose, concern for fairness can continue to be nurtured. But if they are invaded by economic considerations, the nurturing of concern for fairness will surely weaken. The fact that the respondents in this study showed concern for fairness may show only that the nonmarket institutions that helped shape them had not yet been deeply penetrated by economic considerations. However, this offers no guarantees for the future. People possess no built-in safeguards against the erosion of concern for fairness. There is nothing natural, automatic, or inevitable about this concern. It must be learned, and it must be taught. And other things can be taught quite easily in its place. Many of the questions about fairness just reviewed were asked to a group of MBA students at a prestigious business school. In general, their fairness judgments were quite different from the judgments of the respondents in the original study. In general, their judgments were that efforts to maximize profit were fair. All's fair—from increasing prices to decreasing wages—in the market.<sup>71</sup> Had the students learned this in their MBA program, or did they seek

MBA's because they already believed it? Whichever of these possibilities is true, it should make clear to us that there is no reason to count on the concern for fairness as an ineluctable part of our approach to social life.

### Conclusion: The Fragility of Altruism

Amartya Sen has argued that there is a source of concern for fairness that the logic of egoism cannot encompass, indeed, that sometimes leads to actions in direct violation of the logic of egoism.<sup>72</sup> He calls this source of concern "commitment" and suggests that it cannot be incorporated within the atomistic, egoistic framework. To act out of commitment is to do what one thinks is right, what will promote the public welfare, quite apart from whether it promotes one's own. It is to act out of a sense of responsibility as a citizen. Acts of commitment include voting in large, general elections. They include doing one's job to the best of one's ability—going beyond the terms of the contract, even if no one is watching and there is nothing to be gained from it. They include refusing to charge what the traffic will bear for necessities during times of shortage, refusing to capitalize on fortuitous circumstances at the expense of others.

Acts of commitment like these occur routinely. They are what holds society together. But they are a problem for the logic of egoism. As Sen says, "Commitment . . . drives a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare, and much of traditional economic theory relies on the identity of the two." He continues:

The economic theory of utility . . . is sometimes criticized for having too much structure; human beings are alleged to be "simpler" in reality . . . precisely the opposite seems to be the case: traditional theory has *too little* structure. A person is given *one* preference ordering, and as and when the need arises, this is supposed to reflect his interests, represent his welfare, summarize his idea of what should be done, and describe his actual choices and behavior. Can one preference ordering do all these things? A person thus described may be "rational" in the limited sense of revealing no inconsistencies in his choice behavior, but if he has no use for this distinction between quite different concepts, he must be a bit of a fool. The *purely* economic man is indeed close to being a social moron.<sup>73</sup>

The existence of commitment casts the egoistic presumptions of social science in a whole new light. True, when making economic decisions, people will presumably choose that alternative that maximizes self-interest. But before they can do this, they have to make another choice. They have to choose to make an economic decision that is based on self-interest as against, say, a moral one that is based on commitment. In addition to having a set of preferences among commodities, people must be understood to have a set of preferences

among their interests. Preferring one preference hierarchy over another amounts to preferring to be one kind of person over another, preferring to have one kind of character over another. Any thorough analysis of the logic of egoism must include an account of how people choose their preferences and how culture contributes to the set of preferences among which people choose. Much of modern social science takes this most fundamental aspect of human preference and choice as a given.

Fiske points out that most societies are heterogeneous in the rule systems they apply to the regulation of social life, although one may be more dominant than the others. In our own society, despite the dominance of market pricing, virtually all people have social relations guided by each type of rule. Indeed, one's relations with the same person may follow one rule system in one domain and a different rule system in another. Imagine two friends who share completely and indiscriminately their science fiction novels (communal sharing) and at the same time work at a task (patching and painting an apartment) in which one is the expert ordering the other around (authority ranking), who divide precisely their expenses and driving time for a cross-country vacation (equality matching), and agree for one to buy the other's old car at the going market price. It may be that what we identify as essentially unlimited personal freedom in modern America is, in part, the freedom to apply whichever rule system we like to whatever domains of life we like, subject only to the agreement of the people with whom we will be interacting. If this is true, then, in effect, each of us has the power to decide whether to have an independent self or an interdependent one, whether to live by the rules of the market or to live by the rules of community, whether to obviate altruism by connecting our interests to the interests of others, or to obviate it by creating a system in which only the egoists can survive.

## Notes

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