Critical Commentary

What is altruism?☆

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Abstract

The paper defines altruism as charity. The second section of the paper criticizes three rationalistic (what is called “interactional”) theories of altruism, viz., the egoistic, egocentric, and altercentric perspectives. The third section criticizes three normative (what is named “self-actional”) theories of altruism, viz., the Kantian, the socialization argument, and “warm glow” story. The fourth section elaborates on three implications of altruism qua charity. First, while altruism differs from self-interest, it is still within the domain of rational theory. Second, altruism should not be confused with parental care or, what is the same thing, philanthropy. Third, altruism should be distinguished from honesty.

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1. Introduction

On August 5, 1991, an Amish family of 10 members was traveling on a horse-drawn buggy on a north-central Ohio road. A pickup truck, driven by an intoxicated driver, slammed into the back of the buggy, killing six of the 10 instantly. The rest – all children aged, 5, 4, 2, and 1 – were left parentless. The Amish family did not carry insurance, and they do not believe in lawsuits. A local bank in Mansfield, Ohio, set up an account on their behalf that was announced in the Mansfield News Journal, the local newspaper. The newspaper reported that as of October 23, 1991, the account received many donations, totaling $141,000.

The act of charity by anonymous donors can, but with some difficulty, find an accommodation in the Homo economicus house of neoclassical economists. The difficulty originates from the fact that the tools of neoclassical economics have not been originally developed to account for anonymous donation. This failing can be overlooked if it is not for the fact that anonymous donation is not a rare event. The donation of blood, for instance, is a common practice in many parts of the world – despite the fact that the donation receives little public fanfare and little pecuniary reward. Interestingly, some authors have shown theoretically (e.g., Stewart, 1992) and empirically (Titmuss, 1970) that the supply of blood would decline if it were sold via the market. The phenomenon of altruism is generally a considerable component of any society. The phenomenon started to attract the attention of neoclassical economists only recently (e.g., Becker, 1991; Bergstrom, 1996). Altruism can be witnessed at small-scale “gift” sharing in small villages in the developing world to institutionalized charity organizations, associated with community groups, in modern societies.

The paper does not provide a theory of altruism. It only exposes the failings of existing theories, heightened by the view of altruism qua charity – as illustrated in the Amish case. The paper reviews the limitations of existing theories given some of the ramifications, discussed in the paper, of the view of altruism qua charity:

1. Insofar as charity is motivated by the concern over the welfare of the recipient, the benefactor should end up with a lower pecuniary benefit.
2. On the other hand, if the donor is solely motivated by the concern for the welfare of the other, how to distinguish charity from sentimental foolishness? A relatively poor person who gives most of his income to charity would be judged as a sentimental fool. That is, one needs a rational choice model to analyze altruism. So, contrary to some positions (e.g., Helms & Keilany, 1991), altruism does not pose a serious anomaly to the neoclassical approach.
3. If altruism is about charity, altruism cannot be the defining element of the parent–child transfer of wealth. Otherwise, it would be more efficient – as measured by the amount of welfare per dollar – to support the homeless instead of raising children.
4. One should not model altruism as about honesty (the origin of justice). When one pays his debts or discloses the defects of his products, one is not necessarily acting out of altruism qua charity. Any behavior stemming from the concern over fair-
ness – regarding, e.g., income distribution (e.g., Konow, 1996) or the division of a windfall gain in ultimatum games (Güth, 1995; Güth, Schmittberger, & Schwarze, 1982) – is hence outside the scope of the theory of altruism.

5. Altruism cannot be explained by the “warm glow” feeling because such an explanation begs the question: Since the feeling arises only if the act is not sentimentally foolish, what determines an act to be rationally altruistic?

6. The altruistic act is context-dependent, i.e., depends on the relative circumstances of the benefactor and the beneficiary. However, this does not entail that the taste for altruism is “planted” by the agent’s peer group through socialization or by historical custom through cultural habituation. The attempt to explain the altruistic taste in terms of social and cultural tastes begs the question: What is the origin of such social norms or customs?

Understood altruism qua charity, Section 2 of the paper argues that three major rationalistic theories of altruism, grouped here as “interactional,” in fact explain other kinds of resource sharing. Section 3 maintains that three major normative theories of altruism, called here “self-actional,” actually beg the question rather than answer it. The terms “interactional” and “self-actional” are used in the same sense employed by Dewey and Bentley (1973) (see Joas & Beckert, 2002; Khalil, 2003a). Interactional theories (such as neoclassical economics and behavioral psychology), based on rationalistic accounts, explain action mainly in terms of environmental incentives. Self-actional theories (dominant in sociology, anthropology, and Freudian psychology), based on normative accounts, explain action mainly in terms of inner or external norms or structures of the mind, culture, society, psyche, and so on. Thus, according to self-actional accounts, given that action springs from norms, action is inflexible in the face of environmental stimuli or incentives. Section 4 provides three implications of the view of altruism qua charity: First, how does altruism differ from sentimental foolishness? Second, how does altruism differ from parental care (and philanthropy)? Third, how does altruism differ from honesty (justice)?

2. Three interactional (rationalistic) theories

There are three major interactional (rationalistic) theories of altruism, viz., “egoistic,” “egocentric,” and “altercentric.” I call them “interactional” because, despite their differences, they model action after the standard economic approach, viz., as the outcome of optimization (see Khalil, 2003b).

The egoistic perspective, best expressed in the work of Robert Axelrod, maintains that altruistic assistance would be offered if one expects future benefit. The “egocentric” view, affiliated with Gary Becker, argues that the donor’s utility function includes the utility of potential recipients. That is, the donor would give if the enjoyment of watching the pleasure of others exceeds his satisfaction of consuming the said commodity. The “altercentric” approach (“alter” after the Latin “other”) can be surmised from the works of Robert Frank and Herbert Simon. It views the
benefactor’s action as stemming from a personality trait that arises from artificial selection.

The three views, as suggested below, have their counterparts in biology. Neither in biology nor in social theory are the three views necessarily competing hypotheses. In fact, each view is rather suited to a particular kind of resource sharing. But if we define altruism as about charity stemming from genuine human concern, none of the three deal with resource-sharing stemming from altruism. They rather deal with different kinds of resource sharing. To disentangle the different kinds, one needs to study human motives. It is problematic to analyze human motives given the operational difficulty of separating them in empirical study. However, this operational difficulty does not mean that the same model must analyze all incidents of resource sharing. Analytically speaking, one can distinguish between resource sharing motivated by expectation of reciprocation and resource sharing motivated by charity.

2.1. Egoistic perspective

The egoistic view in political science is best expressed in the work of Axelrod (1984) (see also Taylor, 1976), what is known as the “tit-for-tat” strategy. The view resembles the “social exchange” approach of the sociologists Homans (1958) and Blau (1964). In economics, it is developed further by Hirshleifer and Rasmusen (1989), and extended with an evolutionary perspective by Guttman (1996) and others. The egoistic perspective parallels Trivers’s (1971, 1974) theory of “reciprocal altruism” in biology (see also Ghiselin, 1974; Smith, 1982).

The egoistic view presupposes repeated games where beneficence is modeled as a non-myopic self-interested strategy to ensure future cooperation (e.g., Bergstrom & Stark, 1993; Kurz, 1978). The agent who cooperates is actually interested in maximizing his expected utility and, hence, as Becker (1976, p. 821n) notes, it is misleading to call the cooperation altruism in the first place. The egoistic view is illustrated by firms that donate funds to charity to enhance “goodwill,” or agents helping neighbors from a strategic consideration as expressed in repetitive game theory. Game theory predicts the dominance of cooperative strategy only if the games (i.e., supergame) are repeated infinitely and the gains are above a critical value. If the supergame is finite, the dominant strategy to cheat in the last round unravels, i.e., induces agents to cheat in all previous rounds – which interestingly not the case (Selten & Stoecker, 1986).

The egoistic explanation certainly can account for a great deal of the reciprocity phenomenon and why agents generally act as good citizens in market transactions as Mandeville has noted over two centuries ago (Hammond, 1975). The explanation, however, falls short in the face of single-spot interactions as illustrated by the Amish case. Why would an agent help others, when he knows that he will not meet them again or that it will not help his reputational capital? The same problem engulfs the game-theoretic explanation in biology. Why would an organism help another in single-spot exchanges?
2.2. Egocentric perspective

The egocentric agenda can easily account for single-spot resource sharing. However, the egocentric view does not portray altruism as genuine sympathy. The classic source of this line in economics is Hochman and Rodgers (1969). Becker (1976) (cf. Bernheim & Stark, 1988; Bruce & Waldman, 1990; Wintrobe, 1981) articulated further the egocentric view. Becker wanted to explain why do vulnerable altruists survive in a Darwinian world. For Becker, selfish agents (i.e., rotten kids) choose not to take advantage of altruists (parents) if, as a result of investment, the discounted future resource is greater than the currently available one.

Aside from the Darwinian paradox of the survival of the altruist, the altruist in Becker’s model helps the other because the utility function of the other is embedded in the altruist’s. The altruist, through emotional proximity, derives pleasure not because the other is assisted but rather because the other’s pleasure is already part of the altruist’s utility. Such a view does not need to appeal to genes or heredity – although some economists fully adopt the genetic approach and describe human behavior as “programmed” by the maximization of genetic frequency which they and their siblings share (e.g., Bergstrom, 1995). Without the appeal to genetic programming, the egocentric view in economics shares the same analytical apparatus with the inclusive fitness hypothesis, known also as kin selection, in evolutionary biology.

The hypothesis was advanced initially by Hamilton (1964) (see also Williams, 1966; in Brandon & Burian, 1984, pp. 52–68) and further advanced by Wilson (1975) and Dawkins (1976). It basically entails that the gene acts not only to further its own reproductive chances, but also acts to enhance the reproductive chances of identical genes carried by siblings and, more remotely, cousins. So, what appears as the helping of siblings and cousins is, in fact, the assistance of one’s own chances.

The egocentric view employs the familiar neoclassical approach: The maximization of the agent’s function (either utility or genetic fitness) subject to constraints (from budget to traits and institutions). Thus, it is capable of explaining altruism in single-shot transfers. Examples of single-spot transfers include the case of helping stranded strangers and the donation to charity. The egocentric approach explains single-spot transfers in terms of the pleasure that a donor derives from imagining the enjoyment of the beneficiary happening to his own person. Such an explanation presents altruism as ultimately based on vicarious pleasure: An agent contributes to the neighborhood pool club if this donation allows him to watch the swimmers and, hence, make him imagine how it would feel to swim. Even when the agent feels that it is his duty, out of some informal insurance institution, to contribute to voluntary fire department, this sense is reduced to altruism. Posner (Submitted for publication) goes further and explains the indignation people express towards the infringements of the rights of others, i.e., caring for justice, as basically arising from altruism towards strangers.  

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1 Posner further explains the altruism towards strangers in terms of the inclusive fitness hypothesis – where the biological instinct was fooled so one treats the stranger as a biological relative.
There are a number of problems in explaining altruism as vicarious sympathy. First, why not free ride: The “altruist” could watch the swimmers while avoiding any contribution. That is, if sharing of income stems from reflexive, vicarious pleasure, the agent could increase his pleasure even more by reading/watching the pleasure of others without any sacrifice. In fact, there is no need for any sharing of income to begin with. One would simply watch the pleasure of one’s most favored individuals (and the pain of one’s least favored individuals) – as many of us do when we watch movies, plays, and follow the lives of the famous. Second, altruists donate resources even when they cannot enter vicarious pleasure, i.e., imagine the recipients’ circumstance happening to their own person. It is not extraordinary for humans to sympathize with starving children in another country, especially if it is not far from their own country, even though they do not imagine that such a misery befalls them or their children. Third, the egocentric approach entails that the altruist is a masochist. In masochism, the donor is involved in vicarious pleasure: He is ready to suffer disutility (when he donates a portion of his income) in order to induce an offsetting pleasure when he vicariously watches from his station the pleasure of the recipient. The rational masochist, therefore, would want to thank the recipient for being poor because the state of poverty permits the donor to vicariously maximize his own pleasure. Becker’s egocentric theory of altruism entails exactly this strange implication – as Becker (1981, p. 13, n. 2) himself notes. The inability of the egocentric approach to distinguish between altruism and masochism may lead to some absurd results. For instance, as much as masochists welcome the acts of sadists, altruists à la egocentric approach welcome tragedies as the Amish horse-drawn buggy. The altruist qua masochist may not abhor natural disasters befalling others. While such an altruist may refrain from expediting disasters, he would celebrate the opportunities such disasters afford him. To avoid such a conclusion, one has to search for a non-egocentric explanation of single-spot income sharing.

2.3. Altercentric perspective

The altercentric view avoids the failing of the egoistic and the egocentric perspectives. The altercentric view can account for resource sharing where the agent does not stand to collect a benefit in the egoistic form or in the egocentric form. It maintains that the agent, at least in some occasions, may share income because he is built with a pro-social trait. However, such a trait is not modeled as the desire to enhance the welfare of recipient, but rather modeled as springing from, what one may call, a “moral gene.”

One major implication of such an argument is the grouping of altruism and honesty under a single category, viz., a “pro-social” trait. As detailed in Section 4, this implication invites one serious problem. It does not allow one to distinguish between people who choose not to contribute, e.g., to a food pantry, from people who cheat (Khalil, 1995a, 2002). Or, it models the people who donated money to the survivors of the Amish tragedy as motivated by honesty (as if they are producing a public good). The conflation of altruism and honesty is the result of explaining altruism as a personality trait arising from a moral gene.
The moral gene seems to dictate upon the agent to place himself totally in shoes of the potential beneficiary and, hence, to adopt the other’s utility as his own. The complete adoption of the other’s utility may at best describe the behavior of puritans, who judge every action toward others on the basis of the moral principle of social justice. Given the total transfer of stations recommended by such puritans, one pays little attention to the decision-making and needs of the benefactor himself. The actor’s altruistic action is almost dictated by moral, obligatory dictums.

In biology, “group selection” theory as promoted by Wynne-Edwards (1962) and differently by Wilson (1983) (see Wilson & Sober, 1989, 1994) greatly resembles the altercentric approach. Sober (1991, pp. 279–283) argues that groups with higher percentages of other-regarding tastes have greater reproductive success than groups with lesser percentages. However, group selection has been debunked in biology (Williams, 1966) for the same reason “team spirit” has been rejected in economics – namely, the problem of free riding.

In this context, the work of Frank (1988), Simon (1990, 1993), Gintis (2000), and a few others (e.g., Caporael, Dawes, Orbell, & van de Kragt, 1989; Hansson & Stuart, 1992; Margolis, 1981, 1982; Samuelson, 1983, 1993; Güth and Yaari in Witt, 1992) generate the same results promoted by group selection while avoiding the common pitfall of free riding. They generally provide, without departing from the rationality of individual benefit, a Darwinian selection account of other-regarding (altercentric), pro-social traits. Such traits can be shown to be stable in an evolutionary environment without appealing to genetic inheritance (e.g., Richerson & Boyd, 2001, Chap. 9). All what one needs is the idea that groups with such canons have greater survival probability and that such canons are passed on via cultural norms. But the mechanism provided by Frank and the others avoid group selection arguments and, hence, successfully eschews the traditional difficulties besetting the functional-holist approach such as those of Wynne-Edwards in biology and Parsons (1951) in sociology. The way these altercentric theorists achieve this result is by employing artificial selection story, which is one kind of natural selection theory. While natural selection theory generally relies on the external environment to regulate the composition of traits in a population, the artificial selection story relies specifically on the desires and wishes of conspecifics.2

In these altercentric models, pro-social agents proliferate because conspecifics like them that way. A closer look at Frank’s model in particular illustrates that the ones who are selected cannot be altruists, i.e., ones who give without demanding payment. Rather, the selected agents are honest agents who do not cheat. A trader naturally wants to trade with others who – as far as he can detect from biological

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2 Sexual selection can be seen as one kind of artificial selection. As noted by Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man*, sexual selection was “closely analogous to that which man unintentionally, yet effectually, brings to bear on his domesticated productions, when he continues for a long time choosing the most pleasing and useful individuals, without any wish to modify the breed” (quoted in Baldus, 1996, pp. 97–98). To note, Baldus (1996) uses the term “internal selection” as a counterweight to “natural selection.” But Baldus is not clear whether selectors exercise the selection and, hence, the actor is helpless, or whether the actor exercises it, i.e., acting purposefully à la Lamarck.
signals such as sweating and voice tones – do not lie about their products. Agents, whose involuntary body movements betray their dishonest intentions, are eliminated or excluded from trade. In the following generation, such dishonest agents, of course after allowing for cost of detection and that signals may not be perfect indicators, cannot reproduce themselves (or, in a non-biological model, impress others to imitate them).

In such a scenario, Frank cannot maintain that the selected agents can also be altruists. While selectors prefer to intermingle with altruists and be the object of their generosity, the altruists by definition do not receive any payment in return. Thus, the altruist in comparison to the non-altruist is at a disadvantage; the altruist cannot reproduce as successfully as the non-altruist or have others imitate his poverty. While agents are fond of the altruist, this is inconsequential. The altruist’s endowment tends to decline relative to the non-altruists. In contrast, while agents prefer the cooperator, the cooperator derives on average a greater income in multiple single-spot games than does the cheater and, hence, is capable of reproducing himself more successfully than the cheater.

Even if e.g., Frank (1988, p. 65) recognizes altruism as different from honesty in his informal discussion, his model is an account of the proliferation of cooperators, not of altruists. The gist implication of Frank’s model is that the altruistic act, similar to honesty, is not a product of incentives or contextual circumstances, such as sympathetic attachments among cooperators. Thus, it does not see altruism as an act of deliberation, the weighing of personal costs relative to the costs of the cared-about recipient.

This artificial selection model should not be confused with kin selection, as advocated by the inclusive fitness hypothesis (egocentric approach). Kin selection does not model the rise of a moral gene. It rather argues that organisms help each other because of an emotional bond that acts as an “approximating mechanism” or a proxy of genetic relatedness. So, there is no moral gene in the kin selection story.

3. Three self-actional (normative) theories

There are basically three self-actional theories of altruism: The “Kantian” theory, the “socialization/culturalization” account, and the psychological “warm glow” story. I call them “self-actional” because, despite their differences, they model action after the normative view, viz., as the outcome of some categorical imperatives that is oblivious to incentives (see Khalil, 2003b).

3.1. Kantian theory

Kantian theory of ethics somewhat resembles the altercentric approach. Both posit moral dictums as separate from consequential, welfare considerations. There is one important difference, though. The altercentric approach eventually grounds, via artificial selection, such dictums on welfare considerations. In contrast, Kantian theory regards these dictums as indispensable for being human. Kantian theorists
express the idea that humans should not use or deceive others, i.e., treat others as means to one’s benefit.

A modern representative of the Kantian view is the work of Amitai Etzioni. Etzioni (1986) repudiates the neoclassical view of the self as based on a unitary utility function. He maintains that agents act according to two independent kinds of utility—moral ‘utility’ and pleasure utility. For Etzioni, moral ‘utility’ is not a shadow of pleasure utility. It rather stands independent of pleasure utility and the optimization of such utility. Etzioni’s multiple-self-approach resonates with some economists. For instance, Harsanyi (1986) (see also Sen, 1985) radically distinguishes between the familiar utility function and the function that stems from a moral self that dictates what is the proper act to undertake. The two functions, for Etzioni and other champions of the multiple-self-approach, are not only in conflict but also inconsistent in the sense that they cannot be reconciled by a common algorithm or reduced to a higher-level utility function.

The Kantian view, as discussed with regard to the altercentric perspective, cannot distinguish between altruism and honesty (justice). Humans are usually, ceteris paribus, nicer to people they know than to people who are less familiar. Given familiarity, they are usually more helpful to needy agents than helpful to agents who are well off. The issue of social proximity and comparative need (relative costs) engender a variety of human behavior even when preferences and budget constraints are stable. Another problem with the Kantian view, which it shares with other self-actional accounts reviewed below, is that it begs the question: What is the origin of moral dictums? Why should humans act with honesty and not deceive others for their own benefit? Is it acceptable to deceive non-human animals? Why is the ethical boundary erected along the human–non-human divide and not along other divides such as tribal and national ones?

3.2. Socialization/culturalization account

According to the socialization account, the agent tends to act in particular ways in order to gain the approval, respect, admiration, and prestige accorded by one’s significant peer group. George Herbert Mead offers a sophisticated theory of the socialization account (Karier, 1984). What later came to be called symbolic interactionism, Mead’s analysis amounts to the view that the agent’s sense of self is molded by his society:

Self has a character which is different from that of the physiological organism proper, the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity. That is, it develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process (Mead, 1934, p. 173).

Mead explains moral behavior as a result of the ability of humans to see themselves from the stations of others—what Binmore (1994) calls, in another context,
“emphatic preferences.” This explanation is different from the desire to gain fame, which would be an egoistic argument. In Mead’s view, agents take the attitudes of others towards themselves that explain self-judgment and inner conversations:

We are in a possession of selves just in so far as we can and do take the attitudes of others towards ourselves and respond to those attitudes. We approve of ourselves and condemn ourselves. We pat ourselves upon the back and in blind fury attack ourselves. We assume the generalized attitude of the group, in the censor that stands at the door of our...inner conversations (Mead, 1959, pp. 189–190).

Mead asserts that taking the role of others may be concrete at early stages of development. At later stages, however, the “assumed” station is “abstract,” and he calls it the “generalized other,” or “me.” Mead’s concept of “me” turns out to be the “average” public opinion since the individual “is a self only insofar as he takes the attitude of another toward himself” (Mead, 1959, p. 192; cf. Mead, 1982, pp. 151–152, 81). For instance, altruism involves taking “the attitude of the individual whom one is assisting” (Mead, 1982, p. 299). Thus, Mead’s theory, contrary to Adam Smith’s (see Khalil, 1990), does not afford an independent source of conscience or what Smith calls the “man within the breast.” Mead remedies the shortcoming with his concept of the “I” (Mead, 1934, pp. 173–178). However, the “I” falls short of conscience because it is merely a more reflective “me,” arising from how the agent views himself from the station of actual observers. So, the fact that Mead starts with the individual does not mean he is an individualist. Mead basically provides a micro-mechanism of basically a functionalist, socialization account of behavior.

The socialization account in Mead’s case or in general fails to explain the origin of altruism (see Hansson & Stuart, 1992). The account rather begs a fundamental problem that besets all functional-holist theories (which resemble group selection theories in biology): From where does the group’s expectation arise? When a group expects an agent to behave in particular way, the members of that group must have judged that they would had behaved in the expected way if they were in the agent’s shoes. Moral and social values do not exist prior to the appearance of individual persons on the stage (Khalil, 1995c). The socialization account simply postpones the question: What is the origin of community values?

Another strategy is to ground altruism on cultural tastes, where one undertakes altruistic acts because of habituation in a particular culture. Such an approach limits self-interest to the institution of the market, while restricts altruism to the institution of gift exchange. Accordingly, the agent develops a taste for, and become partial towards gift exchange because he sees his family members and neighbors involved in such an institution. However, the theorist still has to provide an explanation of the divergence between the market and the gift institutions. Insofar as the focus is on pure action, one has to have a unified theory of behavior that explains both institutions.

Of more importance, altruistic acts stem from the utility function, while institutions are part of the constraint function that defines the production possibility fron-
tier (Khalil, 1995b). It is inappropriate to explain preferences by appealing to institutions. It is true that institutions, through habitual consumption, influence the development of tastes (Becker, 1974, 1996). At first approximation, however, institutions are the subject of explanation and, hence, cannot be used to explain fundamental features of behavior such as altruism. The appeal to institutions is suitable only when the theorist explains the inertia of rules or preferences in a particular direction. One would be simply begging the question when he uses institutions and socialization to explain altruism.

3.3. Psychological “warm glow” story

Some authors model altruism as the outcome of “warm glow” (e.g., Andreoni, 1995a; see Batson, 1991). It is true that the “warm glow” or pride feeling induces one to act in a particular way. However, the explanation begs the question: The “warm glow” is rather a by-product feeling; i.e., it presupposes the accomplishment of what one considers being worthy of pride.

One experiences “warm glow” or self-pride when one actually carries out the necessary steps to attain what one prefers. Self-pride is better modeled as a shadow or “symbolic” preference that accompanies the augmentation of material or “substantive” preference (Khalil, 1995a, 1999, 2000). When choice confirms the preference, it indicates decisiveness and consequently engenders the “warm glow” of pride. When choice negates preference, it signals lethargy, complacency, procrastination, or indolence that consequently occasions embarrassment. The divergence of choice from preference defies the weak axiom of revealed preference theory and the Paretian optimality criterion. But this set of issues should not concern us here since the focus is on the determination of preference, not on its execution.

Andreoni (1989), who coined the term “warm glow,” defines “impure” altruistic action as the act that is partially motivated by the “warm glow,” and not purely motivated by the concern over the beneficiary’s welfare. Andreoni uses the notion of “warm glow” to explain the puzzle of why altruists do not greatly “free ride,” i.e., totally withhold contribution in light of the contribution of others. He argues that the impure altruist must be motivated by “warm glow.” But, this explanation cannot show what is the right thing to do because “warm glow” is a by-product of doing the right thing (Khalil, 1996b). For an act to occasion pride or respect, it must have been already judged, on the basis of its substantive utility, as the right thing. There are two other obstacles. First, not all acts of non-self-serving altruism afford “warm glow.” It is possible that the helping of others arises from stupidity, lack of self-assertiveness (shyness), or miscalculation. Second, the act towards self-betterment (prudence) engenders the “warm glow” as well. That is, counterpreferential choice of altruism engenders self-disapproval, while pride can stem from preferred self-interested acts. Any act (self- or other-oriented) in the abstract, i.e., without the context of relative costs and resources, cannot be assured to occasion pride. Thus, pride cannot be employed to explain the act. If it is employed, there is no way to distinguish between efficient acts of altruism, on one hand, and acts of altruism chosen expressly to attain attention, vanity, and false pride, on the other. By denying pride as an explaining
item, the observer can, at least theoretically, distinguish between rational altruism and vain altruism.

4. Three implications

4.1. Rationality

4.1.1. Does altruism necessarily express ulterior self-interest?

It is important to examine how donors explain their actions. They usually reason their action as stemming from caring about the interest of the beneficiary (Monroe, 1990). This motivation is clearest in acts of self-sacrifice, where agents do not count on remaining alive to claim any benefit or, when the acts are executed spontaneously as in wars or emergencies, agents do not have time to fancy their imaginations with the pleasure of the recipients. While a great deal of resource-sharing stems from self-serving motives, and even some of them openly so as in the case of reciprocity, economic theory still has to account for acts which negate self-interest. The phenomenon is an anomaly for the dominant, *Homo economicus* approach in economics (and biology).

It is possible to explain self-sacrifice by invoking a preference function that includes an intense taste for after-life utility on the basis of some religious creed or desire for posthumous fame. There are three problems with such a possible explanation. First, the introduction of religious creeds or secular tastes for posthumous fame as explaining items begs even more difficult questions. It also invites the pick-and-choose, *ad hoc* strategy of explanation: The appeal to values in order to save one’s favorite theory. Second, the introduction does not illuminate why the agent chooses this religion over other competing ones, selects a particular interpretation of the decree over other competing interpretations, or acts in the pursuit of posthumous fame over other pursuits. Concerning religious convictions, as Smith (1976) has argued, the appeal to God’s words provides reasons (and sometimes rationalizations), although in alienable forms, of what humans judge as suitable or what they want to do anyway. Likewise, the desire to attain fame provides a crystallization of what one wants to do in any case. This should not mean that values do not play a role. But scientific theory should make such values endogenous rather than conceive them as the ultimate explaining variables. The belief in an after-life celestial or worldly reward is ultimately a “shell” principle similar to “doing the right thing.” Such a principle does not specify the “content” of action. That is, the principle does not inform one when it is worthwhile to sacrifice one’s life. The promise of life-after-death or other rewards may increase the incentive to sacrifice one’s life. However, the promise cannot justify self-sacrifice without regard to costs such as the foregone pleasure of living and benefits such as the value advanced by self-sacrifice.

Third, the introduction of God or posthumous fame, again, postpones the question. Let us assume that the agent knows with certainty how God or terrestrial spectators will judge the act and what the posthumous benefits are. To start with, why
would God or spectators judge the actor as a hero, rather than a sentimental fool? No one aims at gaining lasting benefits, from eternal bliss to posthumous fame, unless he has already concluded that others will consider the act as optimal. So the question persists: How does the agent judge that a particular act is recommended?

The attempt to explain self-sacrifice as stemming from a taste for posthumous paradisiacal or terrestrial utility begs more questions. The only alternative is to recognize the reason given by the altruists: Agents who risk their lives by rushing into a house on fire to save a trapped adult usually state that they did it out of genuine concern over the recipient’s welfare. There is no reason to doubt such utterances unless there is an apparent reason for them to lie.

To caution, however, the concern over the recipient’s welfare differs from pity. If the altruist is ex ante aware of the possibility that the fire started because of the recipient’s negligence, or the recipient’s need for clothes has been caused by the recipient’s distaste for work, the act of altruism – if not adequately reduced – would be laced with condescending pity. But we need not invoke reproving and patronizing pity in order to model pure altruism. Such reproving concerns the judgment of past actions. Insofar as altruism concerns forward-looking action, we may ignore at the entry-level of analysis the question of blame. So, we may ignore the issue of whom to blame for the distress inflicting the recipient, i.e., whether it is the recipient’s laziness and recklessness (which arouses pity or may reduce the amount of help) or if it is the recipient’s insufficient endowment and luck (which arouses pure altruism).

4.1.2. If altruism is not necessarily sentimental foolishness, is it rational?

If a soldier jumps at a grenade while realizing that it is far enough to pose any serious injury to anybody, he would be rated by impartial spectators (and even by himself) as a sentimental fool. Only equally sentimentally foolish spectators, who are aware of the same information, would honor such a soldier. Particular acts of self-sacrifice can rather be judged as utterly asinine rather than heroic: Assuming everything else equal, it would be foolish for someone with two kidneys to donate one kidney to someone who has one functional kidney. It would also be suboptimal for an actor to grant his property to a neighbor whose utility and budget functions do not differ from his. Even when psychologists and economists find “rationality-where-you-least-expect-it,” i.e., when we find some cases of sentimental foolishness to be rational after all, we still need the concept of “sentimental foolishness” in order to make sense of what we mean by rational action.

In the examples of sentimental foolishness, the implicit criterion of judgment is whether the act is efficient from the standpoint of an impartial spectator. The criterion makes it obvious that one cannot model altruism without appealing to the rationality framework. It can be shown easily that a society made up of altruists who are foolish is less fit for survival than a society made up of rational egoists (Khalil, 2003c). So, we need a framework, such as rational decision making, to evaluate whether an altruistic act is worth the cost, i.e., whether the outcome is optimized given the constraints. The framework may face some hurdles in light of the fact
that in many cases the donor may not know his cost relative to the beneficiary’s. However, we can safely assume prefect knowledge without losing the main point at stake. Also, the issue that actual spectators may differ in opinion on whether an act is foolish or heroic should not pose a problem. Or, such a difference of opinion poses no more of a problem than the doubt that the actor himself may feel: Did he take the right decision under the circumstances? In other words, the difference of opinion raises an issue that plagues rational choice theory in general rather than the rational model of altruism in specific.

The thesis that the altruistic act is rational, but not self-oriented, completes the severance of rationality from the interest motive. The severance has only recently been recognized in the literature (e.g., Hirshleifer, 1985). Interest is about ends such as self-, other-, and group-benefits, while rationality of action concerns the maximization of ends in light of means (Elster, 1983, 1989). Robbins (1932) (cf. Khalil, 1996a) was the first to express the statement in unambiguous terms that economics is primarily about optimization rationality.

4.2. Parental care

4.2.1. What is the distinguishing feature of the family?

In light of recent social insurance in Western countries, old-age security is no longer one of the main functions of the family. One major remaining function is parental care. Most economists use the altruism metaphor to model, in different ways, parental care (e.g., Becker, 1991; Bergstrom, 1995; Bergstrom & Stark, 1993; Mulligan, 1997). In fact, the recent growth of the literature on altruism is mostly generated by the research agenda to model cooperation within the family. But is parental care basically about charity?

In the story “A Day in the Country,” Guy de Maupassant (1988) writes about an affluent, but childless couple that scouts the impoverished French countryside to adopt a child. The couple offered a handsome, monthly stipend to the parents of one attractive child, with the promise to raise him as their own. The parents rejected the offer with indignation. A nearby poor peasant couple, however, accepted the same monthly stipend. Many years later, the adopted grown man returned to the village to visit his biological parents. Upon encountering the returning wealthy man, the child who was kept by the “loving” parents erupted in anger. He scorned his parents for being “loving,” for preventing him from leaving the country to a world of greater opportunities. The parents did not reply or state that they lacked sufficient information about the comparative opportunities.

The angry poor young man apparently understood the issue as solely about altruism, his own welfare – and neither about the stipend nor about parental love. His parents did not reject the stipend because it was too low. So, let us treat the size of the stipend as an equitable compensation for the loss of expected income and, hence, a non-issue. From the standpoint of the angry poor young man, his parents held weaker altruistic disposition towards him than the parents who accepted the offer. But if this is the case, the parents should have accepted even a lower stipend. A more plausible explanation is that the stipend per se is the issue and not its size.
The stipend *per se*, i.e., as an indivisible unit, is a symbolic product (Khalil, 2000). It indicates the negation of parental love that has little to do with altruism. Or is parental love indistinguishable from altruism – which would justify the anger of the young man?

Becker would most likely agree with Maupassant’s angry man. Becker proposes a model of parental care as no different from altruism:

> The numerous implications about family behavior...fully apply to the synthetic “family” consisting of a charitable person $i$ and all recipients of his charity (Becker, 1996, pp. 184–185).

If this were the case, agents would be indifferent between raising their own biological child as opposed to adopting a child. Also, agents would prefer to be artificially inseminated with the sperm/egg of geniuses – given that the return on one’s charitable act is a positive function of the quality of the genetic endowment. However, we do not see that sperm/egg banks, which specialize in high quality genetic endowment, are flooded by demand from fertile couples. Evidence shows that even when technology is available and affordable, fertile couples generally prefer to raise their own biological offspring to the adoption of children who are better in terms of genetic quality.

Becker (1991) explains this phenomenon out of the fear that disparity between parents and children would increase the risk of conflict. But why should disparity in ability generate conflict? To the contrary, disparity entails complementary skills that may enhance harmonious division of labor in household production: Parents could mow the grass while the child of the geniuses can invest productively in his education. Further, Becker’s explanation implies that even biological parents should not instill in their children the ambition to achieve goals, such as education or wealth, higher than the ones achieved by the parents. To the contrary, however, biological parents do usually take great delight when their children surpass their own achievements. It seems that Becker’s explanation is not the result of empirical observation but rather the result of the attempt to solve an anomaly arising from his employment of the altruism metaphor to analyze parental care. If there is no difference between charity and parental care, we have at hand an anomaly: Fertile agents should prefer to raise smarter children of geniuses for the same reason they prefer to dedicate their charity to the most needy. In both cases they would be maximizing returns per dollar spent. A better route, which would not give rise to the anomaly, is to distinguish altruism from parental care. While altruism is about charity, parental care stems mainly from non-pathological narcissism.

Such quasi-narcissism explains why we should expect that parents do not normally take a great delight in the superachievements of children constituted by eggs and sperms donated by geniuses. After all, such superachievements may highlight the inadequacy of the parents’ genetic endowment. It seems that agents generally prefer raising children that have their own biological/behavioral features, and the features of partners they have selected, to raising the children of outsiders even if they have better features. A great part of the delight of the biological parents in the achievements of their children arises from self-confirmation: The successful
offspring confirms that the parents have the potential for greatness, but only were frustrated by external circumstances.

Such quasi-narcissism is also witnessed in philanthropy. Philanthropy can be modeled as a subspecies of parenting – where the philanthropist nurtures a favorite project similar to how a parent nurtures a child. In both instances, the giver wants to expand his care to attain a sense of accomplishment. The expenditure of resources in parental care or philanthropy is usually geared to enhance the productive capacity of the recipient. In contrast, the expenditure of resources in altruistic acts (i.e., charity) is generally aimed at satisfying the objective function (i.e., utility) of the recipient. There is another crucial difference. Parental care or philanthropy is not an end in itself as the case with charity. It is rather a mediated way of enhancing the productive capacity of, what is coined here, the “expanded self” of the parent or philanthropist. An agent has an “expanded self” when he tries to extend his own capacity through investment in the capacity of cared-about or loved others. This extension is possible if one defines his capacity as to include the capacity of the cared-about others.

The investment in one’s family, similar to philanthropy, is better modeled as the attempt to enhance the productive ability of the recipient. This investment can be considered entrepreneurial, if one defines entrepreneurship as the action that enhances or at least tests one’s ability (Khalil, 1997). The only difference is that the entrepreneur in parental and philanthropic investments has an expanded self, i.e., he considers the ability of the cared-about other as an extension of this own. The inter- and intragenerational transfers of resources extend rather than – and here where it differs from altruism – negate the interest of the founding parent or philanthropist once that interest is seen as expressive of an expanded self. The expanded self is an attempt to become immortal in a mediated way. With such an attempt, the founding father or philanthropist is not acting altruistically in the sense of charity, but rather acting paternalistically in the sense of leaving a heritage or even a legacy.

As a parent, the giver “loves” the cared-about child in the sense of embracing his identity (i.e., accepting the child’s shortcomings) in the same way as one usually accepts his own. The issue of identity and its acceptance is, I conjecture, the prime reason why people in most cultures feel repugnant towards the selling and buying of babies – even when it facilitates adoption. A children’s market would allow prospective parents to shop for the best qualities and, consequently, to second-guess ex post if they have made the correct choice. Such guessing would be sensed by the growing child as an indication of lack of acceptance (i.e., love), which would hinder his growth. The lottery-like distribution of children – where parents cannot choose apparent biological and behavioral traits – makes it easier for the parents to accept ex post (i.e., love) what they end up with regardless of the identity or traits of the child. A policy implication of this conjecture is that a market for children would not violate the issue of identity and, hence, not immoral if the distribution of children depends on a lottery in which prospective parents pay to participate. Such a lottery-based market still would not prevent the child from knowing that his biological parents gave him up in exchange for money. But such knowledge would not make him feel unwanted more than the feeling of being wanted derived from the
knowledge that his adoptive parents paid for him before they had met him. This conjecture and policy implication needs further substantiation. However, given that identity is part of self-integrity, the market for babies is outside the scope here.

In any case, love is the acceptance of shortcomings and weaknesses of others. Bolle (1991) also distinguishes between altruism and love, but attaches to the terms almost opposite meanings to the ones proposed here. Love does not necessarily entail the sharing of resources and, hence, scarcity is not an issue. In contrast, altruism entails the sharing of one’s resources and, hence, is constrained by the scarcity of such resources.

Furthermore, altruism is not necessarily contingent on whether the altruist loves the recipient, i.e., accepts the recipient’s identity. In contrast, the offering of love – as in the case of the philanthropist who acts out of “loving mankind” (the exact translation of the Greek word *philanthrōpos*) – is contingent on whether the actor loves the recipient. The word *philanthrōpos* appears in the first lines of the Greek tragedy *Prometheus Bound* (composed in Athens by an unknown author in the fifth century B.C.) (Robertson, 1996). If one abstracts from the issue of rebellion against Zeus and Zeus’ consequent punishment of Prometheus for loving mankind, Prometheus’ act of love – viz., the introduction of humans to fire – did not reduce Prometheus’ endowment. So, the act of Prometheus is not altruistic. This conclusion does not deny that some grants arise from love and altruism (e.g., money gifts to newly married couples). But, to model altruism properly, we need to isolate them. The fact that the expression of love is usually associated with the dedication of resources to the development of the beloved subjects – one’s offspring or community – does not mean it can be analyzed by the same model used to explain altruism.

4.2.2. Can we distinguish love from pampering?

The parent–offspring relation, obviously, expresses altruistic aspects – but for the same reason workers within a firm also expresses altruism towards each other. Everything else equal, a worker is more inclined to help a somewhat familiar coworker than a total stranger to fix, e.g., a flat tire in a parking lot. Close proximity cultivates a keener altruistic taste. Such familiarity, however, does not lead one to ground the firm on altruism. Likewise, the fact that a mother purchases another dress for her daughter out of an altruistic taste does not mean that her parental role is based on altruism.

The agent decides to invest time and money and bequeath resources to a child prior to having the child and consequently developing the sympathetic sentiment. If one’s *ex ante* motive is to experience altruistic utility, one would maximize altruistic utility per unit of expenditure by sharing one’s income with extremely needy individuals, such as the homeless, rather than with potential offspring who, in fact, the altruist could not have met to develop sympathetic attachments. Even *ex post*, it is reasonable to predict from Becker’s view of the family that the sharing of income with the homeless towards whom one has developed the appropriate level of altruistic tastes, maximizes utility more than sharing one’s income with his relatively well-to-do offspring. But the fact is that charity towards the homeless is less in abundance than “charity” towards one’s well-to-do children.
The proposed thesis that the desire to rear children basically does not arise from altruism parallels the reasoning advanced by Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* concerning the argument that nationalism, what he calls “love of our own country,” does not stem from the “love of mankind” (Smith, 1976, pp. 227–234). Smith states that we take pride in the success of our own nation, which is not the same as altruism: For Smith, the “love of our country” stems from self-interest, where the self is broadly expanded to include one’s country, while the “love of mankind” stems from altruism. Thus, neither nationalism nor paternal love falls within the scope of the theory of altruism, given that altruism is the negation of self-interest.

Furthermore, if the defining feature of the family is altruism à la Becker, we cannot theoretically differentiate between care that enhances the child’s ability to excel and care which makes the child dependent and spoiled rotten. While parents act altruistic towards their children in many occasions, their main mission is rather to inculcate appropriate values so that they do not become rotten. Such values include self-reliance, low discounting of the future, and the expenditure of the parent’s grant on the accumulation of human capital rather than on instantaneous consumption. The latter may involve changing the child’s time preference. Parental investment in changing the child’s intertemporal preference and inter- and intragenerational transfers is analytically not different from the endowment of scientific, artistic, literary, and other foundations. In parental and philanthropic investments, the entrepreneur-like actor bequeaths resources in order to enhance the recipient’s productive ability, which is part of the constraint function. In contrast, in charity, the benefactor bypasses the productive function and directly expands the possibility consumption bundle. If this is the case, one cannot analyze parental investment and philanthropic inter- and intragenerational transfers after altruism. To wit, if parental and philanthropic investments are modeled à la altruism, we would not be able to differentiate between two kinds of transfers. Namely, we would not be able to distinguish between the pampering (spoiling) of the child with consumption goods to capture the altruism effect – what is called here “destructive love” – and the disciplining of the child to enhance work ethic and, hence, productive ability – what is dubbed here “parental love.”

The difference between the two kinds of transfer may shed light on the phenomenon of intergenerational mobility (see Becker & Tomes, 1979, 1986; Solon, 1992; Tomes, 1981). A puzzling fact is that generally low-earning parents bequeath a greater percentage of their income to their children than high-earning parents. Mulligan (1997), who does not distinguish the transfer that augments the objective function from the investment that enhances the productive capacity, reasons that the less time spent by high-earners, in comparison to the low-earners, arises from the fact that opportunity cost of time is higher for high-earning parents. Consequently, Mulligan reasons, high-earning parents develop less intense altruistic tastes towards their children than low-earning parents, which explains the difference in the transfers. However, the income effect can at least theoretically make high-earners demand greater leisure time with their children. The proposed distinction between altruism and parental care can provide us a more convincing hypothesis. The difference in the transfer might be
related to the difference in the rate of return of investment in the capability of children and, hence, has little to do with the supposed difference in altruistic tastes. It is very feasible that the rate of return of investment declines at the margin. Thus, high-earners are receiving a lower rate of return to their absolutely higher investment in comparison to low-earners.

It is true that the family is characterized by exchanges motivated by altruism. But there are more efficient institutions to advance charity if the distinguishing feature of the family is altruism. In addition, the family fulfills many needs, such as division of labor, companionship, motivation to focus one’s effort, and so on. But other organizational forms can meet such needs. The more feasible distinguishing feature of the family is the organized way in which agents try to satisfy the goals of the expanded self. To meet such goals, the parents try, via education or intragenerational transfers, to mold the human capital and behavioral disposition of their children.

4.3. Honesty

Theorists debate on how to conceive government transfer programs: Are they part of the obligation of the community towards its members as part, e.g., of an insurance scheme à la Rawls (1971), or are they essentially expressive of a more efficient method of administering charity? It is easy to confuse insurance with charity because they equally invoke the moral hazard problem. Nonetheless, there is a difference between the two. The analytical distinction does not undermine the thesis of Gilligan (1982) and others (in Held, 1995) that, in actual social processes, care (charity) and justice (honesty) are complementary goods. Nonetheless, there is a need to distinguish the two forms of morality. Otherwise, one invites conceptual muddle (see Khalil, 2002).

Honesty is understood here as telling the truth and fulfilling contractual obligations even when the benefit from cheating exceeds possible punishment. Altruism also entails the lowering of one’s welfare (fitness), which may explain why many authors confuse it with acts of honesty (e.g., Andreoni, 1995b; Loubergé & Schlesinger, 1988). For instance, Sally (1995, p. 3, n. 4) argues that “cooperation in a non-repeated prisoners’ dilemma is altruistic” (see also Sally, 2000). Sally dubs both cooperation (which may arise out of obligation and duty) and altruism “non-self-interest” behavior – as if the same model can explain cooperation and altruism. In addition, Rose-Ackerman (1996, p. 713) appeals to Sen’s (1977) commitment/sympathy distinction and suggests calling the pure altruists – i.e., people who are exclusively motivated by the concern over the welfare of others and not by the “warm glow” feeling arising from helping them – as acting out of commitment rather than sympathy. Sugden (1984, 1993) models voluntary charity as no different from the obligatory commitment (“reciprocity”) to expend one’s share of effort in the production of public good. Also, Margolis (1982) uses the term “social motivation” to denote both altruism and non-opportunism in single-spot prisoners’ dilemma games.

It is true that both – voluntary action from which altruism stems and obligatory action that informs duty – reduce the agent’s welfare. Furthermore, as Monroe
(1990) records the testimonies of people who risked their lives to rescue Jews from the Holocaust, many actors who act out of altruism also portray their actions as commanded by duty and obligation. However, such overlap in many instances does not justify the analytical confusion of altruism with duty. In the act of altruism, one lowers his interest in order to buttress the recipient’s interest. Such an act is voluntary because it depends, first, on how intimate or sympathetic the altruist is with the recipient and, second, whether the recipient’s enjoyment in comparison to the altruist’s foregone enjoyment justifies such an act. In comparison, in the act of duty in single-spot exchange, one lowers his interest (by not cheating others) in order basically to capture the sense of self-integrity. One does not act honestly in single-spot prisoners’ dilemma mainly in order to increase the interest of the other – although the satisfaction of the interest of the other is a joint-product of such an act. If acting out of duty is basically motivated by the concern over the interest of the other, the payment of debt should rightfully become a function of how much one sympathizes with the creditor’s utility instead of being stipulated by obligatory commitment.

Adam Smith dedicated more than one chapter to the distinction between altruism, which he called the “virtue of beneficence,” and fairness, which he called the “virtue of justice” (Khalil, 1998). To Smith, the reason why one acts justly is not primarily because of sympathy with the other; otherwise, one would behave unjustly because one is usually more sympathetic with his own needs. Rather, the agent acts justly mainly because of self-integrity:

It is not the love of our neighbour, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of those divine virtues (i.e., justice). It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters (Smith, 1976, p. 137).

At least for Smith, action arising from honesty should be modeled as the function of the pursuit of self-worth. While the sense of self-worth is self-oriented, it has to be shown that it is derivative of material welfare in order to ascertain that it is not different from self-interest. It is outside the scope here to argue that self-integrity belongs to a different class of utility than material welfare. But if one insists that self-interest and self-integrity exist à la continuum – as insisted by the orthodox critics of the multiple-self approach as advocated by Etzioni (1986) and Sen (1985) – the action out of duty would buttress self-oriented interest and, hence, opposite to altruistic action. To recall, altruistic action lowers self-oriented interest. That is, the orthodox modeling of self-integrity as derivative of self-interest would, anyhow, set duty apart from altruism insofar as altruism lowers self-interest. So, irrespective of how one models self-integrity (à la Becker or à la Sen), it cannot be prompted by the concern of enhancing the interest of the other. Self-integrity either enhances indirectly self-interest (à la Becker) or enhances self-integrity at the expense of self-interest (à la Sen).

Thus, a successful theory of altruism should not try also to explain duty, i.e., action demanded by obligatory commitment (honesty). Let us take the example of a
swimmer who saves someone from drowning. Let us assume that the swimmer is not a passer-by, but rather a lifeguard who is about to quit his duty, leave the country to study abroad, and no one at the pool is watching his actions (to fit the single-spot prisoners’ dilemma game). Is the lifeguard’s action of saving the drowning agent altruistic, i.e., does it belong to the same class as the action of a passer-by? It is the lifeguard’s duty to try to save the drowning agent even when the lifeguard has five children to support. (The lifeguard should have considered the interest of his children before accepting the job.) In contrast, it is not the passer-by’s duty, although it is an appreciated act of altruism, to try to save the life of the drowning agent even if, *ceteris paribus*, he has no children to feed.

The lumping of altruism with duty entails that, e.g., professors make (or should make) their tenure and promotion decisions according to the sympathetic criterion they use when they give a colleague, whose car broke down, a ride home. Also, it means that professors help students in classrooms or tip waiters in far-from-home restaurants for the same reason as contributing to battered women shelters. Also, it entails that a husband shares in household chores with his working wife out of altruism (rather than duty), or a merchant acts honestly with tourists out of care for their interest.

An honest merchant may not cheat his customers in single-spot games or avoid paying his share to the donation-based local emergency relief service in the community in which he lives. But such an agent may not assist people who are in dire need of help. Such an act might be judged by the agent himself (or any impartial spectator armed with social norms) as selfish, but would not be regarded as opportunistic, dishonest, or free riding. To put it differently, if one contributes his share to the donation-based local fire department, one would be acting out of obligatory commitment. But if one contributes (in a single-spot game) to the fire department of a community in which he is not a member, but about which one cares given its poverty, he would be acting altruistically.

To illustrate the difference, a typical agent readily displays a sign that confirms that he has shared his income fairly with his local fire department, public television, and local school. The display of the sign would not usually be judged crass. It would rather be viewed as urging others to do their share (i.e., not free-ride). But the sign would most probably be viewed as crass if it announces that he shared his income with the Salvation Army. Given that both displays reveal that the person has acted out of self-oriented concerns, the difference in judgment must have risen from the difference between the contexts of the two cases. In the case of a donation to the local fire department, the agent is motivated by self-interest and probably wants to lobby others to do the same in order to avoid the tragedy of the commons. So, there is no discrepancy between what is revealed by the display of the sign and the motive. However, in the case of charity to the Salvation Army, the agent is motivated by other-oriented concern and, hence, there is a discrepancy between what is revealed by the display of the sign and the motive.

Still, to put the difference in other words, when a fire fighter rushes into a building on fire to inspect whether there are victims and loses his life, he would be doing his duty. He would not be acting out of altruism. If it happened that he chose his
career partially because he wants to help others in dire need, and not exclusively because of the salary, his choice would be proportionally altruistic. Even if the fire fighter chose his career exclusively because of the salary, he would still be expected to risk his life at the same frequency as other fire fighters. Likewise, when a physical education teacher explains to students the principles of a nutritious diet, she would be acting out of obligatory commitment. If it happened that she selected her career partially in order to improve the welfare of the young, her choice would be partially altruistic. In either case, she would still be expected to perform the obligatory commitment.

Obligatory commitments can be either informal or formal promises to observe the right of others, given that others observe the actor’s rights. They are also promises to observe the collective interest, i.e., avoid free riding, given that others do not shirk. For instance, tipping in restaurants in the US, reciprocal “gift” exchange in premodern societies where agricultural produce depends greatly on luck (such as weather), and expenditure of resources on randomly affected victims of natural and man-made disasters illustrate informal or implicit obligatory commitments. Rawls’s (1971) concept of “veil of ignorance” explains why agents implicitly commit themselves to the redistribution of income when it arises from luck rather than effort. So, informal rules about resource sharing to avoid the pain of boom-and-bust cycles are not about altruism – as much as formal insurance schemes (even when sponsored by government) are not.

The selection of obligatory commitment in single-spot games necessarily entails the lowering of the actor’s pecuniary (welfare) utility. One has to invoke the taste for self-integrity in order to explain such execution. While an altruistic act also lowers the actor’s welfare, one does not need to explain it via integrity. There is no integrity involved since the actor, to start with, has not informally or formally committed himself to the collective good. So, one has to invoke the taste for welfare of the recipient in order to explain such acts. That is, while single-spot resource sharing in formal and informal insurance schemes is motivated by a non-pecuniary but self-oriented motive, single-spot resource sharing with agents with whom the actor does not have a commitment (as with total strangers or with animals) is motivated by a pecuniary but other-oriented motive.

5. Conclusion

The challenge ahead is to construct an alternative theory. As suggested elsewhere (Khalil, 1990, 2001), Adam Smith’s notion of sympathy, articulated in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, may hold the entry point for a theory of altruism, which he called the “virtue of beneficence.” In the first paragraph of his book, Smith (1976, p. 9) recognizes that humans have motives other than self-interested ones. Smith also recognizes that one has to attend to his self-interest because “Nature” entrusted him to care for it. Thus, charity has to be within reason. In addition, Smith did not regard the parent–child relation as the epitome of altruism. Furthermore, Smith (1976, pp. 78–82) dedicated a chapter distinguishing the virtue of beneficence from the virtue
justice. Moreover, Smith discussed in detail how the impartial spectator, which resides in everyone’s breast (i.e., conscience), is not empowered with a pregiven set of canons or moral tastes. It rather arises from station switching, i.e., how the ability to judge others impartially makes one an impartial judge of his own actions. Therefore, for Smith, altruism is not ultimately prompted by a pregiven “warm glow,” pregiven public opinion or social peer group, or pregiven institutions.

In light of over two hundred years of social and psychological theory, the idea of neutral station-switching sounds naïve. This is not the place to defend this basic insight. However, the value of the “classics” resides in the possibility that they may possess “golden nuggets” that were tarnished through neglect as later theories have evolved along entrenched perspectives and questions. To be sure, Smith’s psychological theory is not complete. Nonetheless, it promises a fruitful framework upon which later contributions can be rethought and redigested.

This paper tried to clarify issues that cut across disciplinary lines. The phenomenon of altruism proves to be a fertile soil for interdisciplinary dialogue that, hopefully, can lead to a unified theory. Such a theory can be an example for cooperation with regard to other questions. While the understanding of human behavior is a formidable task, it is possible to make progress through the reexamination of basic assumption in light of the contributions of other disciplines.

References


