

On Indirect Reciprocity

The Distinction Between Reciprocity and Altruism, and a Comment on Suicide Terrorism

By JAN TULLBERG*

ABSTRACT. Indirect reciprocity, defined as a beneficial act whose return comes from someone other than the act's recipient, is a common phenomenon in human societies. However, it is a poorly analyzed phenomenon with respect to payoffs. Are the expectations of return realistic, or not? Are these expectations pro-social attitudes, or illusions induced through manipulation? I discuss four categories of putative indirect reciprocity, two of which pertain to interaction between individuals and two of which involve social systems. The conclusion is that two of these categories, reciprocal reputation and institutionalized reciprocity, are strongly linked to reciprocity, whereas the other two categories, generous reputation and metaphysical reward, are likely to involve only an element of illusionary reciprocity and a substantial degree of altruism.

IN THIS PAPER, I discuss the relationship between altruism and reciprocity and its relevance to normative and descriptive ethics. On the descriptive level, the paper argues against the strong tendency in biology to dissolve altruism. Normatively, the article argues against the dominant position in philosophy, which states that altruistic norms and acts are desired. An analysis of the events of September 11, 2001 indicates that institutionalized reciprocity and reciprocal reputation are insufficient for understanding those terrorists' behavior. However, altruism, particularly in the form of metaphysical reward, seems to provide a most important explanation. This judgment supports the two general conclusions of the paper. There should be a strict separation between reciprocity and altruism, instead of using the term "indirect reciprocity" as a wide gray zone. Real indirect reciprocity,

*The author is at the Stockholm School of Economics, PO Box 6501, 113 83 Stockholm, Sweden, e-mail: jan.tullberg@hhs.se. The author thanks Birgitta Tullberg, Hans De Geer, and Germund Hesslow for many valuable comments.

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i.e., reciprocal reputation and institutionalized reciprocity, is socially valuable. Altruism, sometimes presented as indirect reciprocity, is more of an obstacle than an asset to a democratic society.

Introduction

ALTRUISM is a central concept in moral philosophy as well as in sociobiology. However, this concept is certainly problematic, since in moral philosophy it tends to constitute the very bulk of what is called morality, whereas in sociobiology altruism as an explanation of human behavior tends to disappear. Apparent altruistic behavior can instead be explained by kin selection, reciprocity, and extensions of reciprocity (in other words, by natural selection), and these biological explanations leave little room for a behavior to be classified as altruism in a strict sense (see, e.g., Trivers 1971; Wilson 1979; Alexander 1979, 1987). The analysis in this paper acknowledges altruism, understood as actions that involve a net cost (see, e.g., Sesardic 1995), as a real factor in human societies. Arguments for this judgment will be presented later. However, this acknowledgment does not imply an affirmation of the common judgment in much of moral philosophy, which states that altruism is both important and beneficial. The value of altruism as a social factor needs to be reconsidered in light of an improved understanding of human behavior.

In his important book on moral systems, Alexander uses the term "indirect reciprocity," defined as acts in which "the return is expected from someone other than the recipient of the beneficence" (1987, p. 85). Unfortunately, there are few theoretical investigations of cooperation including more than two individuals (Legge 1996). Boyd and Richerson (1989), investigating indirect reciprocity, however, concluded that it is more important to identify noncooperators and exclude them from cooperation than to focus on one's own treatment. They also concluded that a weakness of indirect reciprocity is that it is much more vulnerable to errors than is direct reciprocity. Recent theoretical work by Nowak and Sigmund (1998) claims that cooperation entirely based on indirect reciprocity can be evolutionarily stable, and that one determining factor for this is the availability of information about the cooperative quality of other individuals

in the population. Work by Leimar and Hammerstein (2001) introduces a quality dimension in the “good standing” that improves the theoretical possibilities of indirect reciprocity.

In Alexander’s (1987) 21 categories of human social behavior, altruism is nowhere to be found, and the reason given is that “we are not yet shown any beneficent behavior that cannot easily and logically be linked to nepotism and reciprocity” (1987, pp. 87, 160). According to this view, what humans name altruism is basically indirect reciprocity, with the return given in less obvious ways and without it having to be understood or consciously expected by the actor. For instance, the return could be elevated status, which in a second step could bring advantages.

Similarly, Wilson (1979) distinguishes between two basic forms of social behavior, namely, “hard-core” and “soft-core” altruism, corresponding to kin selection and reciprocity, respectively. He tends to place strict altruism in neither of these categories. Thus, in sociobiology altruism is exposed to the special problem of extinction, as succinctly pointed out by Trivers (1971, p. 35).

Neither “kin altruism” nor “reciprocal altruism” is altruism in a strict sense, as these phenomena can be understood from a selfish gene perspective. Indirect reciprocity might simply be a form of reciprocity, as indicated both by the term and by how most sociobiologists understand behavior. On the other hand, however, it might contain patterns that involve altruism. It is therefore of value to analyze the broad concept of indirect reciprocity as defined above, since it can include several types of social interactions that may vary in their probability of giving the actor a net return, or, in other words, in their probability of excluding or including altruism. Elsewhere, Tullberg and Tullberg (1994, 1996, 1997) have argued at greater length about the rationale of doubting the value of altruism as an ethical and social ambition, and this doubt makes the distinction between reciprocity and altruism important.

This article focuses on the gray zone between reciprocity and altruism. I propose the following four categories of indirect reciprocity for an analysis of this phenomenon in human societies: (1) reciprocal reputation, (2) generous reputation, (3) institutionalized reciprocity (the giver receives a return benefit not from the beneficiary but from

a social institution), and (4) metaphysical reward (the giver expects a return benefit in the next life). The first two categories pertain to interactions between individuals, whereas the last two pertain to interactions between individuals and systems, such as society and religion. Before starting to penetrate these four groups, I must say something about measurements and definitions.

I

Intentions, Actual Results, and Expected Results

THE ULTIMATE WAY TO UNDERSTAND BEHAVIOR is from the point of view of effects. Effects should be measured by patterns of behavior, or strategies. These strategies should then be judged according to their statistically expected results. For an evolutionary biologist this view comes naturally, but a philosopher like Adam Smith also shares this view, stressing the importance of “design, not events” (see, e.g., Binmore 1994). When I classify according to effects, I mean effects that are expected in this statistical sense, in contrast to the two variants of intention—what the actor intended and what we as observers think he intended. Such an expected effect is also in contrast to actual outcome—credit loss of a bank should not be regarded as *ex post facto* altruism.

Strategies are not necessarily made explicit by the actor, who indeed may not even be conscious of them (Lopreato 1981). In philosophy, as in law, claims of good intentions are given a central importance although there are excellent possibilities for manipulation. This not only through convincing lies, but also through lies that are improbable but not impossible. Furthermore, our thoughts, prejudices, and self-deception might be quite complicated and hard to sort out. A type of behavior might be egoistic in terms of its statistical effects, even if the agent himself is convinced of a pure altruistic motivation. The intention is by itself of limited interest. However, psychology is also a proximate mechanism for the execution of behavior, and the factor of prime interest here is the behavior and the consequences of that behavior.

Natural selection works against behaviors that have negative effects, but this is a long-term process. Behaviors, having evolved because

they were adaptive in one environment, may not be useful in a new environment. The dramatic change of human society away from hunter-gatherer mode has put humans in radically new environments to which they hardly can be expected to be perfectly adapted. Ideology and religion are strong forces that influence humans to behave in ways that are suboptimal from the perspective of organism and genes. Psychological heuristics—normally helpful for both cognitive and emotional choices—will be exploited by others to obtain advantages. My position is that humans do perform some altruistic behaviors, or acts in which the expected returns do not compensate for the costs, and that such altruism can occur more or less systematically in societies. The immediate reasons for altruism—psychological urge, successful manipulation, failure in understanding, complex situations—can vary; the main point is that people commit acts with an expected net cost (in terms of resources, survival, and reproduction).

II

Reciprocal Reputation Versus Generous Reputation

SOME READERS MIGHT ASSOCIATE REPUTATION with an anxious or self-important obsession about what others think. One might thus be motivated to stress the importance of reputation for being chosen for social interaction, rather than dismissed. This section will not argue any further about the importance of reputation but will discuss whether a reciprocal reputation or a generous reputation is more useful.

Consider a situation with two interacting individuals, A and B, and an observer, C. C, depending upon his observation of A and B's interactions, can perform actions of indirect reciprocity. One possibility is the observation that A helps B and B later returns the help to A, whereupon C helps B, with the expectation that B will return the help to C (Alexander 1987, Table 2.2). In this case C expects a fruitful reciprocal relationship with B because the latter has shown to be able to reciprocate help, or in other words, has a good reciprocal reputation. C may also consider helping A, with the expectation that help is returned.

Each reciprocal interaction has to be initiated by someone, so a

simple A-helps-B behavior may be interpreted in terms of reciprocity and may attract a reciprocal C action. For instance, a new neighbor who lends his car to an established neighbor indicates his interest for interaction in the new location. However, in general, the most likely forecast for a reciprocal relationship is B's behavior, because he has shown his ability to return a favor.

An A-helps-B situation is, however, not necessarily an initiation of a reciprocal relationship. It could be an altruistic act, lending a generous reputation to A. One type of interested bystander is an egoistically inclined C. He is not attracted to this situation because of a potential reciprocal relationship, but in order to get the next favor. Another type of bystander is an altruistically inclined C, but since altruists are not reciprocal individuals getting together for mutual benefit, there is no particular reason why C should help A. An altruistic A does not commit to returning a favor should it take place; he may make other priorities, such as someone more in need of help than C. A reciprocally inclined C will appreciate that A is not selfish and he will not mind waiting for a favor. But if C is considering a favor to A, it is more attractive to C if A has a reciprocal reputation rather than the less focused generous reputation.

Alexander states that altruism is often a dishonest display and that one systematically overvalues one's own altruism. However, he endorses teaching the altruistic message: "This means that whether or not we know it when we speak favorably to our children about Good Samaritanism, we are telling them about a behavior that has a strong likelihood of being reproductively profitable" (1987, p. 102). Seeing such rationality means that sufficient attention is not paid to the alternative of anti-rational behavior. If convinced of an adaptive explanation for altruism, it is natural for one to focus on different possible explanations that would make a behavior rational not only for the beneficiary but also in some indirect way for the actor.

The popularity of a generous reputation among the potential receivers needs no long explanation, but why do people invest resources in such a reputation? Are they all real altruists? One line of thought is to make a parallel to "conspicuous consumption" (coined by Thorstein Veblen). Such behavior does not primarily bring value for money, but shows off wealth. Burning money has always been a

way of telling others that you have plenty. “Conspicuous benevolence” (Coleman 1991) is another way to impress onlookers for the same kind of reason. This “Pharisaical giving”—even if ethically dubious—can generate indirect effects such as respect, ability to reciprocate, envy, or admiration. There is, however, no point in labeling everything reciprocity and then assuming that there is a payback. Bragging might not always be a rational behavior.

In social life we are likely to pay a lot of attention to a person’s credit history, faithfulness, and loyalty to friends. Someone’s donation record is less central and might even generate some uneasiness. In conclusion, it is highly probable that reciprocal reputation is a more important social factor than a generous reputation is. Few Cs—altruistic, reciprocal, or egoistic—will do A a favor as a return for his help to B. The C that is actually helping A will do this, not as a return, but as a starting point for a new reciprocal relationship.

In their theoretical analysis of indirect reciprocity, Boyd and Richerson (1989) used two models, one with a strategy they called “upstream tit-for-tat,” in which individual help is not conditioned upon the receiver’s previous behavior, but on whether the actor himself has received help from somebody else, and the other with a strategy called “downstream tit-for-tat,” in which help is given to individuals who themselves have helped somebody else. The second strategy, the spread of which needs the least restrictive conditions, corresponds to the above situation in which C helps A, i.e., the generous reputation situation. This strategy is also used in the theoretical framework of Nowak and Sigmund (1998). It would be interesting to extend these analyses of indirect reciprocity to include a strategy corresponding to the C-helps-B situation, i.e., the reciprocal reputation situation.

It is important to note the difference between a reciprocal and a generous reputation. It is the first type of reputation that is most likely to generate new and lasting reciprocal relationships. Reciprocal reputation will attract observers who hope to avoid cheats and find reliable individuals for the possibility of cooperation for mutual benefit. A generous reputation may cause popularity but may generate less cooperation, because individuals with egoistic or altruistic strategies may have other ambitions.

III

Institutionalized Reciprocity

THIS CATEGORY REPRESENTS such benefits and retributions that are formalized by society. They are indirect in the sense that it is the state or authority, not the initial beneficiary or the victim of an act, that pays or punishes the actor. The taxpayer receives his old age pension and murderers are imprisoned by the state. The question is whether such reward and sanction systems should be *quid pro quo* or if the return should be less strict.

There are dangers in making the consequences of rule breaking and rule following flexible or uncertain, because such a discrepancy between social goals and practical enforcement probably leads to unwanted effects. Thus, a risk of not receiving reciprocal reward would probably result in fewer helpful acts, and negative acts would probably increase as a result of a deficiency of reciprocity, i.e., deficiency in punitive action. The optimistic thief and the pessimistic cooperator will be pushed in the wrong direction from a societal viewpoint. To have occasional draconian enforcement might provide sufficient repulsion, but is hardly the way to build justice. Systems that make a savings by shortchanging people who make a positive contribution are also hard to view as ethical. Such a lack of fairness will cause frustration and erode acceptance of social rules, and it is therefore likely that the clearer and more credible the rules are, the greater will be their positive effect.

The argument for the opposite view is based on ambition despite the institutions' shortcomings. An altruistic agitation often prevails at a high level, demanding the social system be not only fair, but also compassionate, forgiving, and sympathetic. Ambitions reach further than real capacity, and the state wants its citizens to do good deeds for which it cannot compensate. Frequently, politicians ask for funds for services that they then fail to deliver. Some scientists (e.g., Brunsson 1989) see such discrepancies between promises and deliveries as the high art of politics, but such politics are likely to undermine public confidence and pro-social behavior. In my opinion, there are good reasons for institutionalized reciprocity to be transparent;

problems arise when a set of actions is officially praised or condemned, but real reward and punishment are linked to other criteria.

It is often assumed that heroism is associated with substantial payoff. This quote from Fisher takes a radical stand: "The mere fact that the prosperity of the group is at stake makes the sacrifice of individual lives occasionally advantageous, though this, I believe, is a minor consideration compared with the enormous advantage conferred by prestige of the hero upon all his kinsmen" (1958 [1930], p. 265). I believe that a more common reaction is that war veterans feel they don't get the appreciation they expected. If alive, it is certainly better to have the reputation of a hero than a coward, but whether heroism gives a high enough dividend to motivate real-life sacrifices is another matter. It seems likely that the children of killed veterans will suffer a decreased fitness.

In connection to the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, the father of one of the terrorists praised his son in a television interview. Did he succeed in drawing some fame to himself and his family and gaining an "enormous advantage" in his society? This seems dubious. However, it appears likely that family support for a deadly mission influences a terrorist's behavior. The less social support for such actions, the less a potential family advantage can be counted upon by the terrorist. Several Saudi terrorists had broken relations with their families before September 11, which hampers possible positive kin effects.

After a major war, a society has a battered economy, and the sheer number of dead soldiers makes compensation to relatives out of the question. A minor activity such as terrorism offers better opportunities for compensation; a program of state-sponsored terrorism could create a relationship of a mercenary character. The situation of al-Qaeda members in the Taliban's war against the Northern Alliance can be seen as such a relationship. The foreign legion of 850 Arabs in the Beni Hissar Camp were paid generously. The salaries of Afghan administrators started at \$120 a month—equivalent to a good yearly payment in that country—and the foreigners received more (*The Economist*, December 1, 2001, p. 23). This is a compensation level well above what most other soldiers in the third world kill and risk

their lives for. However, if such rewards are sufficient for suicide terrorism is another matter. The al-Qaeda terrorists do not belong to social groups in economic despair—15 out of the 19 terrorists in the September 11 attack were from affluent Saudi Arabia, many were graduated, and several had even received the privilege of a Western education (*The Economist*, February 2, 2002, p. 38). These people did not face a choice between starvation and death by a violent act.

Suicide bombers in Palestine come from a poorer background and face more difficulties supporting themselves and their families. Furthermore, there are community efforts to support the families of persons killed in the ethnic struggle. The al-Qaeda network is considered affluent, but I have not found any information regarding organized support to the families of the *jihadis*. To the extent that material factors are important for suicide bombers, they should be more so for Palestinians.

IV

Metaphysical Reward

MANY MORAL SYSTEMS provide reassurance that the world is constructed in such a way that it pays to be an altruist. Religions bring this message in the form of reincarnation and paradise. Kant argued that God and an eternal life were necessary for the existence of morality—and that God exists because of this “necessity” (the moral proof of God; see, e.g., Mackie 1977). Such a pattern of indirect reciprocity—A helps B and later C (God) rewards A generously in an unobservable way—is labeled “metaphysical reward” in this paper.

Altruistic messages are indeed often loaded with promises of reciprocal payoffs, but such promises must be scrutinized. If the payoffs actually turn out to be true, the altruistic label is misleading. However, if the reciprocal messages turn out to be false, we are left with a net cost, i.e., altruism.

To discard benefits in the next life in the calculus is not uncontested among scholars. The French philosopher Pascal (1973 [1670]) concluded that in a situation in which the probability of a reward is very close to zero but the reward is extremely high, one should try

to strive for this improbable goal. Ordinary human behavior does not seem to follow Pascal's advice. Rather, minor degrees of doubt appear to be sufficient for practical deviation from the behavior linked to an eternal life.

It might seem reasonable to consider a very strong belief in the link to future rewards not only as a factor for motivation, but also for the classification of the behavior. E. O. Wilson (1979) discusses the example of Mother Theresa. Since it is highly probable that she believed in the Bible's teaching about the possibility of admission to paradise, her sacrifices in this world can be seen as measures taken for a more precious goal—the soul's salvation. Wilson's conclusion is that she therefore was selfish, not altruistic. However, the classification of a deed should, following our prior discussion of criteria, not be based on an agent's hope, but on the statistical outcome in the real world. I think Joseph Lopreato makes an important point when commenting on Wilson's judgment: "If the issue is stated this way, there are by fiat no altruists, for we shall find that in one fashion or another we all seek for ourselves 'good' as contrasted to 'evil.' But that is not the issue. The sociobiology of altruism concerns the salvation or perdition of genes, not of souls" (Lopreato 1981, p. 117).

Kin aid is a common phenomenon, and its rationale is well understood by the theory of inclusive fitness. There is no problem in understanding a hybrid between kin aid and reciprocity, as in the following sequence: A helps B, followed by B helps K (child of A). If B provides help to K that A is not able to perform, the return benefit is most valuable. However, if the receiver of this benefit is not real kin but pseudo kin, another situation emerges.

Parasitism is sometimes accomplished by pure force, but sometimes by manipulation of the host animal. The classical example is the adoptive parents of the cuckoo who act as if they were involved in providing for their kin. The cuckoo succeeds in manipulating the victims' understanding of the situation and to trigger a beneficial behavior. This parasitic behavior is based on a pseudo kin relationship.

Men have used the feeling of affection between brothers and transformed it into the special bond of blood brothers. This is really reciprocity, formalized into stronger ties of rights and liabilities than between unrelated men of a tribe. In history there are brotherhoods

of monasteries and of revolutionary activists. The ruler is normally described as the father of his subjects, from “the Holy Father” in Rome to “the Little Father” in Moscow. The point I want to make is that altruistic agitation is supported in its appeal by a pseudo kin vocabulary (e.g., Holper 1996) as well as by metaphysical reward.

One likely explanation for the existence of altruistic propaganda is that it is a technique to manipulate people (Williams 1989); if one makes one’s fellow man believe that he has to serve others, there are two likely beneficiaries: the receiver and the organizer. It is not justified to see such benefits as a side effect, but much more probably as the driving force. Altruism is hard to explain as a result of natural selection, but it is a likely product of altruistic agitation. The mere popularity of this agitation for such a long time indicates some effects, or it should have evaporated.

If the potential giver is reluctant, the promise of a future generous return might make a sacrifice acceptable. Proponents of altruism frequently soften their demands for duty by linking them to pseudo kin benefits and metaphysical reward. As indicated by Wilson’s comments on Mother Theresa, such behavior appears less altruistic because it does not reflect a pure altruistic motivation. But judged according to the most important aspect, real-world effects, such behavior is altruistic. She, and others, make sacrifices that are not sufficiently rewarded in this life to be rational.

In line with this reasoning, the religious expectations of the terrorists and their self-sacrificing acts should be considered as another example of metaphysical reward. Not only the character of the deed, but also the nature of the reward, will make many observers inclined to classify suicide killings as nonaltruistic. Hamas suicide killers generally get promises of an arrival to paradise the second their blood reaches the ground and a welcome by 70 or 72 affectionate virgins. In a television documentary, a 16-year-old candidate witnessed about being tempted by eternal life, a palace, and an unlimited source of yogurt, but just one wife (“Eight Days” 1996). Central to the classification of metaphysical reward is the sacrifice in this life and the reward postponed until the next. The agent’s subjective hope of reward might be essential when explaining self-sacrificing behavior,

but the expected value of an action for the agent in this world is crucial for the classification of the action.

The sacrifice of one's own life requires special motivation. If the agent already is in a "doomed to death" situation, the step is not as great to die defiantly and aggressively. Another situation is one of high risk of death, but still with a possibility of survival, a possibility that can be magnified with self-illusional optimism. The suicide terrorist does not have these two possibilities, but metaphysical reward seems to provide a further alternative.

Research by Dr. Eyad Sarraj, based on 16 suicide bombers in Gaza, concludes that religion, not material factors, is the motivation behind the suicide bombers in that region. The deeds are motivated by a strong feeling of power versus a foe otherwise perceived as intimidatingly forceful. Furthermore, the deed is combined with an impression of not really dying. The social background of the suicide bombers is of poverty and scant education, but since there are differences between them, pure misery is not considered a crucial factor (Kershner 2001).

The metaphysical reward can also be augmented by social pressure. In the Muslim teaching received by the Hamas activists, there are also rewards in paradise for the relatives of a suicide bomber. The prospect of some benefits in paradise for his family might exert pressure upon the suicide candidate. Recording the candidate expressing his determination on video makes it even more difficult for him to revise his decision if he has second thoughts.

It seems hard not to see the religious rewards as a crucial part of the motivation, making up for a deficit in rationality. If that conclusion is valid, it should be even more so for the al-Qaeda terrorists, given their social background.

V

Discussion

IN ORDER TO BE CLASSIFIED AS RECIPROCITY, a behavior has to be shown to include a probable payoff. The reason for making the present categorization is to shed light on the possible inclusion of altruism in

indirect reciprocity. The conclusion is that reciprocal reputation and institutionalized reciprocity are both strongly linked to reciprocity, whereas the payoffs from generous reputation and metaphysical reward are questionable. Accordingly, these two categories have a much stronger link to altruism than to reciprocity. Figure 1 illustrates the split.

The analysis indicates that some skepticism toward the concept of indirect reciprocity is justified. It is often treated as a black box, but in my opinion it is important to stress the prime difference between reciprocity and altruism. This criticism is not focused on the rather unusual term “indirect reciprocity,” but on all ideas supportive of a gray zone between reciprocity and altruism.

Alexander (1987) shares the view that altruism is a manipulative game, but he sees no real distortion; we all play by the same rules even if nobody acknowledges them officially. “[W]hether they know it or not, people are indeed pursuing their own self (= genetic) interest, at least insofar as current environments mimic those of the past” (1987, p. 164). I hold that there are many respects in which the current environments do not mimic those of the past. Judging what is rational

Figure 1

Categories of indirect reciprocity based on the likelihood of involving reciprocity (return payoffs) or altruism. Examples in parenthesis.

Indirect Reciprocity

	<u>Substantial Reciprocity</u>	<u>Altruism/Illusionary Reciprocity</u>
<u>Individual</u>	Reciprocal Reputation	Generous Reputation
<u>Level</u>	(credit record)	(giving to charity)
<u>Societal</u>	Institutionalized Reciprocity	Metaphysical Reward
<u>Level</u>	(legal sentence)	(suicide bomber)

and what is not is difficult enough in complex situations, and when this process is under heavy misinformation and it is considered unacceptable to make rational evaluations, it becomes even more difficult. Such obscurity of various situations increases the possibility for a real location of benefits, with a prime flow taking place from manipulated to manipulating individuals and institutions.

Many people believe that societies develop toward an ever-increasing degree of indirect reciprocity or altruistic behavior. One reason is that the competition of "I am holier than you are" builds cumulatively and that "no one can afford to lag too far behind relative to everyone else" (Alexander 1987, pp. 105, 193). A similar view was held by Herbert Spencer (1884), who saw man acting out of self-interest, but thought that since society moves toward increased division of work and complicated interactions, man would adopt altruistic behavior.

However, these theories of expanding benevolence miss some essentials. They hold true, insofar as human societies have become more complicated with increased divisions of labor and the units for collectivist action and displays of loyalty have become larger over time. But in terms of real sacrifices it is hard to see a change toward more unselfish behavior. A common opinion is that there is less willingness to make sacrifices today than previously. It has probably been an advantage most of the time to be conformist, i.e., to support the conventional ideas in a society (see, e.g., Boyd and Richerson 1985); therefore, adjustments to current norms are often important in the sense that there are problems for the one who "lags far behind." But now, being poor and ascetic is less of a virtue, whereas expressing compassion about the poor is more important. Theories of an expanding circle (Singer 1981) may have very little to do with real behavior, and it is hard to see that there is a real trend toward more indiscriminate altruism.

Most people are probably quite aware of a high frequency of manipulation and fraud in altruistic messages. But before drawing a conclusion from such critical observations, we must all reflect on further consequences. If strong propaganda for altruism is a necessary component of the social fabric, we might have to accept it. Moral questions should perhaps not be regarded as a choice between truth

and lies, but as a support to necessary myths. For instance, liberals in the 18th century advocated more religious freedom but not the right to be an atheist, because a belief in God was seen as a necessary precondition for social life. The question then is whether a good social life is possible without a common belief in God or a permanent agitation for altruism.

The example of recent terrorist attacks indicates the negative side of religious influence. Because of the political strategy of building a broad front against al-Qaeda, the official statement claims that the terrorists do not use, but misuse, Islam. A further motivation for this judgment is that criticism of Islam is also likely to tar Christianity—the major difference might not be faith as such, but that Christian societies have become secularized to a much higher degree than Muslim societies. The enlightenment in the West has no counterpart in the Muslim world, where modernization has been more limited and less successful, the secular reforms in Turkey by Kemal Ataturk being the most ambitious attempt.

In the long perspective it seems more reasonable to see the co-evolutionary interaction between war and religion as enforcing rather than inhibiting each other. Religion has a long history of blessing the weapons. Its crucial role is not motivating men to kill, but the much harder task of making them accept the high risk of being killed.

Primitive warfare consists largely of raids, in which the attacker uses an advantage in surprise and numbers that confers limited risks. In this situation, men run greater risks of being killed as targets when performing a civil chore than when engaged in a war party. If aggression is the best defense, then conflict is automatically fuelled, and this pattern is in little need of ideological support. This situation is radically changed with the emergence of battle. In a confrontation that has elements of a chicken race, being in the front line carries very high death risk. Here, a willingness to sacrifice one's own life becomes essential, and religion is an important factor in this motivation. For centuries, Christianity, Islam, and other religions have been used for this mission. In this respect bin Laden is no innovator.

VI

Conclusions

ALTRUISTIC ACTIONS ARE CERTAINLY NOT A MAJOR, but a minor, part of human life. But do altruistic norms improve the human condition, or are they tools for manipulation? Perhaps both. Public opinion will probably hold that altruism is beneficial if not exaggerated. This attitude might be a reason for the acceptance of many extreme principles held in the field of ethics. The major line is probably an inconsistent model: intend altruism and obtain reciprocity. A message of straightforward reciprocity will bring about some cooperation, but an altruistic spirit will reach a higher level. Altruism is a benevolent manipulation—partly an illusion and partly a misnomer—but it does bring some improvements despite these intellectual shortcomings that are better left unnoticed. Some kinds of indirect reciprocity can be seen as ideas supporting such a positive view of altruistic influence.

According to most sociobiologists, we can, and should, face the truth that altruism is an illusion. This critique of ethics is driven by the quest for honesty and understanding, but does not imply much for a reformist potential of behavior. Human behavior is adapted; it is only philosophy that is confused. The Good Samaritan will receive prestige for his kindness, and the kin of the dead hero will be rewarded. There is little support for the belief that many good deeds bring no reward.

This paper suggests a third position: seeing positive potential in a better understanding. Even if humans are not all mind, the rational capacity to make proper decisions should not be underestimated. Knowledge, about self and others, is normally a way of improvement. The common praise of altruistic behavior as well as altruistic ethics creates a problem for honest communication and rational cooperation. In a situation with widespread deception and self-deception, it is difficult to make the proper judgments.

I do not agree that all behaviors labeled “indirect reciprocity” should be regarded as reciprocity. There is a danger that concepts such as indirect reciprocity develop into a black box in which various

phenomena are intermingled. Several factors contribute to blur the distinction between reciprocity and altruism. Reciprocal acts are decorated with altruistic labels, and altruistic admonitions are softened with reciprocal possibilities. In each case it is always possible to motivate a reclassification by making new interpretations of the motifs and intentions of the actor. Such common confusion is no accident but a useful tool to all of us who want others to do something that is not in their own interests—but is in line with ours.

Political and military leaders have always flattered their own people and soldiers for their willingness to make sacrifices, and the enemy is routinely described as egoistic and cowardly. Such a description distorts the situation.

For military purposes, the self-sacrifice of the “*canon-fodder*” is a disputable strategy. The “*do and die*” ideal peaked during the national enthusiasm of World War I. Later, both Hitler and Stalin frequently issued orders of “*no retreat, no surrender.*” However, the military of the West has switched from the “*Charge of the Light Brigade*” to a less gung-ho attitude. The movie character of General Patton expressed a more self-preserving view in a speech to his soldiers: “*No bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard [die] for his country.*” Fighting spirit is supported by a high priority for minimizing own casualties and saving the wounded. The wars in the Persian Gulf, Kosovo, and Afghanistan have been too successful to be viewed as a new standard for the risk involved in war. The democracies are likely to face a much higher death toll in the future, as in a less recent past. However, moderate risk in warfare can also be accepted without superstition and a belief in eternal life. Such a judgment might be a key to a less enthusiastic evaluation of self-sacrificing heroism.

The conclusion of this analysis is that metaphysical reward is a key factor in suicidal terrorism. It is an element that is not necessary in order for war to take place, but it makes war worse. A man willingly killing himself will not be very careful with his compatriots, but will demand the same sacrifice from them. Furthermore, he will be even more careless with the lives of the enemy. When looking at carnage at its worst, the generalization that the huge crimes of humanity have been conducted for an altruistic purpose seems to ring true. Meta-

physical reward is a powerful expression of altruism, providing an essential ideological rationale for self-destructive behavior.

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