From Altruism to Sociality: A switch in perception

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Abstract

The article critically reviews concepts and uses of the term altruism in relation to the emergence of the capitalist welfare state. It argues that altruism may be regarded as a fetishized representation of 'sociality' and that notions of altruism tend to obscure or distort understandings of the essential social interdependence that characterises humanity as a species. The article reaches back to anthropological evidence, to religious and philosophical influences, and to insights from scientific inquiry and it makes a case for a humanistic switch in perspective within the study of social policy.

Key words: altruism; fetishism; interdependence; social policy; sociality; species-being

Altruism is a fluid concept that has been discussed in academic social policy with reference, on the one hand, to aspects of the motivation that may drive social policymakers and service providers, and on the other, to the willingness of the public to countenance or indeed support a welfare state. The concept of sociality is differently and more holistically premised and alludes to the essentially constitutive social interdependence that characterises human beings as a species. The term has acquired particular meaning through recent reinterpretations of the philosophical writings of Marx and can potentially reframe understandings of the aims and functions of social policy. Drawing on scholarly concepts of fetishism this article will critically review debates relevant to the part that altruism may or may not have played in the development of social policies and the ways in which the perception and realisation of sociality have been obscured. Adopting a broad-brush approach, it will consider the origins of altruism in symbolically invested forms of gift giving; in religious injunctions and philosophical ideals: and as a latent yet ambiguous characteristic of human behaviour revealed through scientific study. The article will contend that the wider concept of sociality provides a materialist perspective that grounds the development and analysis of social policy in the substantive realities of being human and does so more firmly than notions of altruism premised on abstract ideals of virtue and civic duty, or on suppositions about naturally evolved residual instincts.

Conceptualising altruism

The positivist perspective

The term 'altruism' was reputedly coined by Auguste Comte, a founding father of positivist sociology. For Comte altruism meant 'living for others': a form of selflessness that entailed putting the good of others above what is good for oneself. Less stringent interpretations of the term have

since come to refer to a more generalised concern with the welfare of others, and Page, for example, envisages an egoistic-altruistic continuum, ranging from selfishness at one end, to self-interest, to reciprocity, to other oriented action, through to 'pure' selflessness at the other (1996: 15). The selflessness advocated by Comte (1851) was at the altruistic extreme of this continuum and was proposed in response to the perceived threat from a rise of selfish individualism and social disorder that he attributed to the effects of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. He posited a three-stage theory of social evolution which, he contended, had begun with a theological stage in which governance of the social order was maintained through religious commandments, premised on irrational beliefs; followed by a metaphysical stage in which revolutionary post-Enlightenment philosophical claims to universal human rights and individual liberties were disruptive of an established paternalistic social order. The third and final stage, he hoped, should culminate in a resolution: a consolidation of the social order in which the structure of society would be rationally maintained through wise governance.

Comte's notion of altruism was predicated on the ideal of a perfectible form of humanity that required an effective denial of individual personality and could be achieved through the development of a systematised sociology: a sort of 'social physics', through which to analyse and sustain the complex organic structures and stability of society. To that end, in later work (1896), he proposed and sought to promote a 'Religion of Humanity', complete with sacraments and a hierarchical priesthood. Having once dismissed deist theological philosophy as 'immature fetishism', he proposed a '*Grande Fétische*' of his own: an institution through which to instigate and subjectivise an altruistic social order. His secular humanist religion found favour within France and the United States, and proved particularly influential in Brazil, where the religion's guiding motto, 'Order and Progress', remains inscribed on the national flag. Comte's positivist project was once aptly characterised as 'Catholicism without Christianity' (T.H. Huxley, cited in Swingewood, 1970): it was at root a deeply conservative project, which sought to justify the maintenance of certain social inequalities and forms of economic exploitation as inevitable features of an orderly society. Marx was dismissive of Comte's work (1887: 332), while at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum the puritanical selflessness demanded by Comte is also anathema to right-wing libertarians (e.g. Rand, 1964).

Despite its conservatism, Comte's secular humanist creed echoed selective elements of earlier liberal thinkers, such as Thomas Paine (see Cave, 2009) and may later have had some albeit *indirect* influence within social liberal circles in the early twentieth century. One of Comte's keenest disciples was one Henry Beveridge, an officer and district judge in the British Indian civil service, who was not only the father of William Beveridge, the author of the celebrated report which lay the foundations for the post-WWII British welfare state (1942; and see Harris, 1998), but father-in-law to R.H. Tawney, a leading twentieth century thinker on social welfare (see George & Page, 1995).

State welfare as institutionalised altruism

The leading figure who first brought the concept of altruism into academic social policy debates was Richard Titmuss. The historical emergence of social welfare institutions in affluent industrialised countries was, he claimed, 'a major force in sustaining the social conscience' (1967: 350): it entailed, in effect, an institutionalisation of altruism. It created mechanisms for the giving of aid in accordance with criteria that conflicted with the values of the marketplace, and which aimed to achieve some measure of economic redistribution within large, complex and technologically advanced societies –

not merely between neighbours, but between strangers. 'Altruism by strangers for strangers was and is an attempt to fill a moral void created by applied science.' (1967: 353). Titmuss returned to the theme of altruism in *The Gift Relationship* (1970) a comparative study of blood donation systems in different welfare states, which demonstrated the superiority of *non*-commercial systems in which all blood was *voluntarily* donated. However, the book contains a broader discussion of the significance of altruism for social policy in general and an ethical distinction between what constitutes a social as opposed an economic good.

Titmuss draws on anthropological sources (to which we shall return in more detail) to examine the significance of gift-giving in earlier human societies and in some surviving indigenous cultures. Such evidence suggests that prior to the dominance of market-based forms of exchange in goods and services, the giving and exchange of gifts were not economic but moral transactions with cultural and symbolic significance for the social functioning and cohesion of a community. Titmuss speculated as to whether the form and immanent function of such gift giving is reflected in blood donation systems that rely on voluntary donations, in community-level social services that harness voluntary-sector input, and more generally in modern social security systems and tax-financed healthcare provision. He claimed that human beings have 'a social and a biological need to help' (1970: 311) and social policy is therefore concerned not only with organising the provision of functional social necessities, but also facilitating the realisation of 'ultra-obligations'; the fulfilment of a right to give. The penultimate chapter of *The Gift Relationship* is entitled 'Who is my stranger', an oblique allusion to religious precepts (to which we shall also return), though its purpose was to press the point that societies that are largely secular, complex and impersonally structured can benefit from organised altruism.

Whether explicitly or implicitly Titmuss' insight informed conventional wisdom as to the beneficent nature of the modern welfare state as established – in various guises – throughout the global North, notwithstanding that, as Goodin puts it, institutionalising altruism 'fundamentally changes altruism from that which motivates mutual aid in village societies' (1988: 115). Altruism expressed through state aid financed through compulsory taxation amounts to the acknowledgement of rights rather than the giving of gifts; an acknowledgement born in practice out of a reluctant and fragile ideological consensus (Page, 1996). In an imagined 'golden age' (Esping-Andersen, 1996), before that essentially social liberal consensus was eroded, the welfare state exhibited what Ellis (2012: 2) has cast as a 'very successful political philosophy' which would have been sustainable 'in any society in which people are encouraged to maintain a social humanist conscience'.

We have observed that altruism was anathema to right-wing libertarians and though the welfare state has by no means been extinguished, its 'golden age' was ended, in part, through the rise in the 1970s of a nascent neo-liberal movement (e.g. Hayek, 1960; Minford, 1991): a movement convinced of the liberating virtues of free market capitalism and opposed in principle to state intervention. However, belief in the altruistic underpinnings of state welfare were also challenged by neo-Marxist thinkers (e.g. Gough, 1979; Offe, 1984) on the one hand, and post-structuralist thinking (e.g. Foucault, 1977; Garland, 1981) on the other, all of whom contended that the welfare state was driven not so much by altruism as by forces of social control. The former claimed that the welfare state while ostensibly benefiting poorer and working people, ultimately served the interests of capitalism by regulating labour and limiting social unrest. The latter observed the ways in which state institutions manifested immanent relations of disciplinary power. In the past half century

welfare states around the world have become relatively more 'austere' (Blyth, 2013), but also increasingly intrusive in their techniques of governance (M. Dean 2010).

Important to the initial 'success' of the implicit political philosophy of the welfare state was the notion of a public service ethos: a presumption that the doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers and administrators working within the welfare state were in some measure altruistically motivated. The public sector may be thought to be free from the self-interest that drives the world of private commerce and service provision. This belief may be seen to have to some extent endured – considering, for example, the wave of public support for health and social care workers in the UK exhibited during the early stages of the Coronavirus pandemic (Wood & Skeggs, 2020) – but had been explicitly challenged by neo-liberal Public Choice Theory (Butler, 2012) and systematically eroded through managerial reforms within the public services. The promotion of New Public Managerialism (Clarke & Newman, 1997) was expressly intended to make public services function more like corporate businesses. Le Grand (2003) has contended that a range of reforms introduced by UK governments during the 1980s and '90s in the spheres of education, health and social services reflected the extent to which policymakers assumed that the welfare professionals and state administrators who provided state services were not selfless or altruistic 'knights', but self-seeking and instrumental 'knaves'. Le Grand himself concluded that when designing public services, a balance should be struck between four factors: affording some measure of trust in the altruism and professionalism of welfare providers; target-setting and performance management; giving 'voice' to 'service users' (in the way that successful businesses must listen to their customers); and extending choice to service users between competing service providers (2007). His implication is that we cannot entirely rely on the altruism of service providers, though it may be noted that there is evidence that despite managerialist impositions, elements of a commitment to a public service ethos can endure among service providers (H. Dean, 2003).

If indeed a democratic welfare state is to be understood as institutionalised altruism, its success – indeed its survival – rests not only upon the altruism of welfare providers but on a degree of altruistic tolerance and therefore electoral support among tax and social insurance contribution payers. There is a massive body of national and international social attitude data that demonstrates the complex ways in which public support for social spending fluctuates over time (e.g. Mau & Veghte, 2007; Ormston & Curtice, 2015). Among the general public, altruistic sentiment in relation to state welfare provision is neither universal nor stable. Nevertheless, qualitative evidence relating to the moral repertoires discernible within popular discourse suggests that an undercurrent of altruistic concern for issues of social justice may endure despite the ascendancy of neo-liberal discourse within the public sphere (H.Dean 1998). During their lives the citizens of a welfare state can be both taxpayers and the recipients of state aid and it may in principle be supposed that they might identify, empathise with, or have compassion for, any other citizen. But in many instances a faceless welfare state may negate, rather than embody, authentic caring. Certain kinds of assistance when rendered at a distance or expressed through electoral support for the social rights of strangers may feel inherently less meaningful and less valuable than that which can be rendered face-to-face. Ignatieff, for example, reflecting on state provision for homeless people expresses a lingering resentment that 'the moral relations that pass between my income and the stranger at my door pass through the arteries of the state' (1984: 141). He and others fear the prospect of a society in which, though needs may be met, we become a society of 'moral strangers'.

Conceptualising sociality

Meanings

'Sociality' is an uncommonly used word, loosely employed merely as a synonym for 'sociability', though it can carry deeper meanings. Klein (2011) adopts the term as if it were a synonym for Aristotles's *zöon politicon* or Seneca's *homo sociale*, but the origins of the word itself may be traced to the mid-seventeenth century when, in the context of disputes as to the foundations of natural law, Hugo Grotius (b.1583 - d.1645) contended that legal order in human society should rightly be founded not on divine revelation, but the human *need* for 'sociality' (Honneth, 2017: 6). According to Grotius, human nature is constituted through an interaction between competing drives (Miller, 2021); for self-preservation on the one hand and 'sociality' on the other. These drives may each entail rational desires and emotive impulses and insofar as individual survival depends on social connectedness or interdependency they must be mediated by laws of freedom. Honneth (2017: ch.1) goes on to show how Grotius' particular use of the term 'social*ity*' was subsumed in the eighteenth century by the emergence of the 'social*ist*' movement, with arguments not merely for individual freedom, but for social freedom.

More recently, Lévinas' explorations of inter-subjectivity (1969, 2006) portray humanity's 'unquenchable desire for sociality' (Bergo, 2019: para. 2.3.3). Lévinas echoes Grotius' juxtaposition between the historical materiality of the human struggle for existence and the intersubjective sensibility by which humans can, uniquely in Nature, *consciously* transcend self-interest. But there is also here an echo of an ancient pan-African philosophy, Ubuntu, whose clear and simple mantra is *isumuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – 'a person is a person through other persons' (Ramose, 2003; and see Strozenberg et al., 2015). Resonating insights are to be found in Vygotsky's study of the role that inter-psychological processes play in the formation of human consciousness (1978); processes intimately embodied in human relationships within families, communities and the spectrum of formal and informal social institutions by which human societies shape themselves. Vygotsky's thinking is expressly reflected in Tomasello's theory of 'ontogenetic sociality' (2021). Ontogeny is concerned with the species-specific development of the individual organism and in the case of the human organism it interrogates the link between species being and processes of individual socialisation. Tomasello's work is focused on early childhood development, but he grounds it in an appreciation of the ways that biological evolution has prepared humans for unique forms of socio-cultural activity that must then be developed in each human individual as they socially mature; as they begin to relate to others, become co-operative, become group minded, become morally responsible. These characteristics Tomasello presents as the elements of human sociality.

Human need

We might here return to Titmuss' claim that human beings have a social and a biological *need* to help others (see above); a claim that is arguably more consistent with conceptions of 'sociality' as a species characteristic than it is with conceptions of altruism as an individual trait. An understanding of sociality as an element of constitutive human needs may be found in Marx's elusive concept of 'radical needs' (see Heller, 1974: ch. IV). Human needs may in this context be regarded as radical in the sense that they are not governed by laws of nature but stem from the roots of human existence: they represent on the one hand 'the collective Ought'; but on the other the causal necessities of

human development. Throughout the course of enduring conflicts between the forces and relations of production, the human species has developed, but has yet universally to satisfy, its needs. An important anthropological perspective on the philosophy of Marx has been offered by György Márkus (1978), which suggests that sociality is one of four radical needs: four closely interdependent characteristics that define our 'species being' (for a fuller exposition see H. Dean, 2020; 2021), the others being:

Consciousness. The means by which humans have a personal and an inter-subjective awareness of our identity; by which we seek meaning in the world around us and in our relationships to others; and by which we can critically engage with that world in conjunction with others.

Work. That is to say, all forms of purposeful action; behaviour that is intentional, pre-formulated and creative; a uniquely proactive form of metabolism with Nature by which to fashion the world to meet human needs.

Historical development. The capacity, unlike any other species, to make our own history; not only to interpret the world, but to change it; to struggle for a good or indeed a better life, for full or fuller human self-realisation.

There are, of course, other ostensibly social animals that live in herds or packs, but as Aristotle asserted, the human being is uniquely a *zöon politikon*. *Zöon politikon* may be translated as 'social animal' as well as 'political animal' and Marx contended this to be so in a most literal sense since a human beings can only individuate themselves in the midst of society (1857: 84). The understanding of sociality attributed to Marx by Markus (1978: 31) encompassed both the communal character of human life and the manner in which that life is socio-historically shaped. It is through the social construction and dynamic renewal of *shared* language, customs, institutions, knowledge and beliefs that the human species has developed and may continue to develop. However, compared with many of the other species with which they share the planet, human beings are physically frail and vulnerable, particularly towards the beginning and end of their lives. The fact that human beings have survived and come to dominate the world as they have has been possible not only through brain power, ingenuity and a capacity for collaborative organisation, but also through cultural sharing, socially organised care and mutual support. Human beings are inherently interdependent creatures (Turner, 2006) and their constitutive characteristic as a species is the manner in which they attempt purposefully to manage their vulnerabilities. It has been argued that caring *for*, *about* and *with* one another 'may be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Tronto, 1994: 103).

The concept of sociality for which this article argues is one that extends far wider than altruism. It embraces the entire spectrum of interdependencies essential to our species being, including: the love entailed in intimate relationships; the solidarity and cooperation entailed within human communities and between generations; but also a *universal* recognition of mutual needs and claims between strangers. It may be contended that in human history notions of individual altruism have tended to occlude notions of collective sociality and in seeking an explanation for this we might turn to the concepts of fetishism and fetishization.

Concepts of fetishism and their application

The terms fetish and fetishism had first been coined by Charles de Brosses (1765) in relation to a seminal study of the worship of fetish gods in West Africa. We have seen that Comte adopted the terms in relation both to his critiques of past theological thinking and his proposed secular religion of humanity. The terms have since fallen in and out of fashion and become conceptually highly elastic. For the moment, however, we shall offer a reductive composite definition: a fetish can be a symbolic artefact, a culturally constructed entity or a moral ideal; vested with spiritual power, imagined properties, universal authority or inherent value; and which signifies and mediates – while potentially obscuring or distorting – the perception or understanding of essentially human activities and relationships. For the purposes of the various threads to be pursued within this article, 'fetish*ism*' and 'fetish*ization*' refer respectively to the beliefs and processes by which – perhaps throughout the whole of history – human beings may have denied, or have been in part deceived as to, underlying or immanent realities relating to the depth of their social interdependence.

Anthropological insights

The term 'altruism' has been applied to or used to describe social phenomena inherent to the historical development of the human species and here we may turn – as Titmuss did – to the social-anthropological evidence and in particular the work of Marcel Mauss (1925). Mauss' work had emerged (like that of his uncle, the sociologist Emile Durkheim, and indeed Comte before him) with concerns associated with the rise of individualism, the decline of traditional forms of authority and the dominance of the market as the medium of human relations (Graeber, 2001: 152).

Though Mauss resisted the suggestion (see Morris, 2017: 252-3), it may be contended that the attribution of spiritual significance or magical powers to material objects exchanged as gifts amounted to a form of 'fetishism'. What Mauss observed through a comparative analysis of a wide variety of ethnographic anthropological studies, conducted in different parts of the world, was that certain pre-modern tribal societies, without formal market systems or any established state apparatus, were constituted or might be described as 'gift societies'. The circulation of goods, the maintenance of social relations and the exercise of power within and between families, clans and tribes were mediated through the giving and receiving of gifts: gifts 'which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behaviour is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest' (1925: 1). 'Food, women, children, possessions charms, land, labour, services, religious offices, rank—everything is stuff to be given away and repaid. In perpetual interchange of what we may call spiritual matter, comprising men and things, these elements pass and repass between clans and individuals, ranks, sexes and generations' (*ibid*.: 11-12).

The giving and receiving of gifts, was not informed by any rational calculus of equivalence, nor was it motivated by 'altruistic' moral sentiment, but by spiritual or magical meanings attributed to the things around which substantive human interactions were centred. The phenomenon had a multiplicity of diverse manifestations but had elements in common, echoed in different ways in different communities. The Maori concept of *hau* relates to the spirit of an object that is exchanged

between owners, but which is for ever seeking to return to its original owner or to the sanctuary of the forest from which it first came; a spirit that that might visit illness or death upon a recipient who fails to honour it or, at the right time, to pass on the gifted item or return it. The *hau* sustains an open-ended and enduring cycle of communal obligation. The Polynesian concept of *mana* relates to a spiritual life force, a magical power, a social standing expressed through the distribution of gifts. The phenomenon of the *potlach* observed, inter alia, among indigenous North West Americans, entails spectacular, ostensibly wasteful and sometimes competitive displays of public generosity that amount to statements of relative power through which to demand not gratitude, but the loyalty of the recipients. The Trobiand Islanders' system of ceremonial inter-tribal exchange involving *kula* – ornaments, charms and adornments – that then re-circulate over generations and play a role in preserving peaceful inter-tribal relations. The spirit of the gift, as conceived in these various guises, is not an unambiguously beneficent or altruistic spirit, yet it masks the basis on which workable social interdependencies may be forged and sustained.

Religious injunctions and philosophical ideals

In *The Gift*, Mauss focussed on the spiritualised or fetishized basis of gift exchange, but other anthropological and historical studies of religion have focussed more broadly on the worship of fetish objects – whether manufactured (as for example in totemism) or natural (as for example in animism) – but also ancient/classical mythologies, polytheistic religions, non-theistic mystical religions and the roots of the mono-theistic 'revealed' religions (Dunbar 2022). All religions draw distinctions between the sacred and profane; the transcendent and the worldly. Mystical Eastern religious traditions emphasise conduct and principles informed by contemplative spirituality, placing stress upon otherworldly selflessness that is potentially consistent with altruism. The concept of *Dana* in Hinduism (but also in Buddhism and Jainism) relates to the cultivation of practical generosity and alms giving. The Abrahamic religions have ambiguous interpretations of the biblical direction (in Leviticus 27:30) that a 'tithe' (or tenth) of the wealth supposedly bestowed upon Man by God belongs, and must be returned, to God. This ordinance may be related to regular offerings by the faithful in cash or kind to support the work of religious institutions. But it may also find expression through:

- *Tzedakah* in Judaism as an expression of righteousness (but also fairness) through charitable giving.
- *Zakat* in Islam as a religious obligation periodically to share a portion of one's wealth with needy members of the *Ummah* (the worldwide community of the faithful). But there is also *Sadaqua,* the expression of righteousness through wider charitable giving.
- *Caritas* in Christianity, as a term that may be translated as either charity or love.

In the case of Christianity the meaning of *caritas* is underpinned by the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 27-35) in which Christ offers a reinterpretation of Jewish law, which required that one should love one's neighbour as oneself. Asked "Who is my neighbour?", Jesus relates the story of a Samaritan (a gentile) who goes out of his way to provide care, assistance and financial support for a Jewish traveller – a complete stranger who had been the victim of a violent robbery. The illustration implies an assertion that there is a universal duty owed by all humans to every other human. It has been suggested by Holland (2020) that teachings broadly to be found throughout the

New Testament have exercised an implicit 'dominion' across the Western world and are pragmatically reflected in juristic constructions of human rights and in the dominant liberal democratic consensus; including, by implication, moral values by which to justify the welfare state. There clearly is a sense in which religious authority affects the fluctuation of human understandings and motivation. But taken as an example, the principle illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan is by no means a uniquely Christian value. And, if we are to take Christian teaching as any kind of example, it should be emphasised that over the millennia Christian theologians have offered fiercely contested understandings of righteousness: on the one hand, the Augustinian view of original sin from which a person can be saved by good works; on the other, Luther's contention that a person can only be saved through a surrender to and the embrace of Christ's divine mercy or 'grace'.

Whereas Comte posited a transition between theological and metaphysical historical eras, theological and philosophical thinking have in reality evolved in parallel; often in conversation with one another. Classical philosophers sought to establish ethical principles based on reason rather than custom or superstition. Aristotle (c. 350 BCE) laid the foundations for a secular 'virtue ethics'. The ideals of an ethical life and of civic duty were premised on the distinction to be drawn between natural animal instincts and the power of human reason. This fundamental distinction was later debated and elaborated by philosophers of the European 'Enlightenment', with competing assertions as whether human nature is essentially selfish (Hobbes, 1651) or 'noble' (Rousseau, 1755). Kant (1785) sought to draw another distinction: between, on the one hand, a 'perfect' logically deducible duty – a categorical imperative that no human being should treat another merely as a means to their own ends – and on the other, those 'imperfect' yet morally *desirable* duties that might be equated with freely undertaken altruistic conduct. Kant drew from de Brosses' concept of fetishism (see Morris, 2017: 166-167) and while critiquing the exteriority of religion as a regulator of collective moral principles, acknowledged the moral intentions and pedagogic functions that may be served by religious observance. It is significant that all the world's main religions had already endorsed the 'Golden Rule' – the maxim that one should treat others as one would wish to be treated oneself (e.g. O'Donell, 2006) – of which Kant's categorical imperative is in effect a reformulation.

The idea that that human consciousness is developed as much by religious faith as by philosophical reasoning was picked up in Hegel's (b.1770 - d.1831) account of the development of human reason. For Hegel, fetish worship and the religion of magic, were religions of 'unfreedom' since they denied human beings an awareness of their own essential spiritual being (Morris: 179-187). But through the development of family, civil society and the liberal state human beings have since acquired an *objective* spiritual consciousness; and through art, religion and philosophy they achieve an *absolute* spiritual consciousness. This argument was critically developed by Feuerbach (1841), who's contention (though he does not actually deploy the term 'fetish') was that Christianity's conceptualisation of God is a fetishized construct. God becomes a representation or projection of humanity's own idealised essence or potential. The implication is that for the individual human, acts of 'grace' or of altruism and the acceptance of duties towards other human beings are derived from, and subordinated to, an abstract ideal.

Denial of sociality

As may be seen, individual altruism has historically been valued, and can give expression to certain aspects of sociality. But as an essential characteristic of human species-being, sociality has nevertheless been consistently denied or under-recognised. It has been persistently and brutally compromised by relations of power; by violence, exploitation and oppression; and by systemic inequalities and social disadvantages. But the diversely constructed concept of fetishism suggests subtler processes by which the perception of human sociality may be distorted or concealed. This article is concerned with dynamic connections between human sociality and human consciousness: with the extent to which sociality *requires* consciousness, albeit that consciousness of sociality may be mediated in ways that cloud or frustrate its perception.

Marx is reputed to have been aware of de Brosses' seminal concept of fetishism, regarding it as a 'general theory of projection' (Worrel & Krier, 2018: 2). That awareness appears to have been reflected in his concern with mechanisms of alienation that sublate substantive realities into 'phantom objectivities'. This applied not only in his well-known critique of religious belief, but in his critique of Hegel's doctrine of the state. Hegel, he claims, inverts reality by deriving empirical institutions from an abstract ideal. In this way the subjective reality of human being and human activity becomes objectified in the institution of a state, which like the church has a mysterious autonomy of its own. 'Reality is not deemed to be itself but another reality instead. The ordinary empirical world is not governed by its own mind, but by a mind alien to it' (1843: 62). And in his later work, Marx explores the fetishized understandings of value that are inherent to the capitalist mode of production and exchange. In particular, he explicitly demonstrated the fetish-character of the commodity in which the social character of the human beings who produced it appears as an objective character of the product itself. The commodity form inverts reality by constructing 'material relations between persons and social relations between things' (1887: 73). Marx also had much to say, for example, about the fetishized character of finance and interest-bearing capital, but his focus on the commodity form is especially significant for understanding how the commodification of labour power reduced work, as a constitutive human activity, to potentially exploitative and anti-social wage labour.

It may be said that within capitalist societies human beings can be alienated from their sociality by the objective forces of both market and state. And while it is important to acknowledge the ameliorative effects of the welfare state, it is necessary to observe the ways in which state welfare in liberal democracies can undermine rather than give effect to human sociality. Where citizenship of a welfare state is premised upon a fetishized conception of the sovereign individual, this obscures the social interdependence that is essential to our humanity; thereby casting state welfare dependency as shameful and individual altruism as virtuous. In previous work it has been suggested (H. Dean, 2000) that the shaming effect associated with the conditionality of welfare provision, the manner of its delivery and surrounding policy discourse can express a form of 'dependency fetishism'. The term was intended to capture the way in which prevailing policy discourse demonised certain forms of welfare dependency. At root, the fetish here is in fact the objectified ideal of individual sovereignty and independence, which casts the ideal citizen as a self-sufficient agent and denies the realities of human interdependence, while nevertheless celebrating the freedom of the individual to be altruistic.

Controversy and compromise

We have seen that theologians and philosophers have debated whether human beings' 'natural' sinfulness or hedonism can or may be superseded by redemption or enlightenment, but scientists have addressed themselves to the question of whether and how instinctive individual selfishness or adaptive selflessness have contributed to the survival and progress of the human species. There remains an enduring scientific controversy relating to the competing roles played in human behaviour by altruism and self-interest and the compromises that result.

Genetics -vs- culture

We might start with Darwin's seminal contribution to evolutionary theory (1859) in which he demonstrated that all biological species have adapted and evolved through a process of natural selection according to the survival of the fittest. The precise mechanism by which phenotypical characteristics are passed from generation to generation has been clarified through the development of genetic science and the discovery of DNA. However, Darwin himself in *The Descent of Man* (1871: ch. III) drew distinctions between:

- Co-operative, mutually protective and even self-sacrificial social behaviours, which may be heritable and therefore favour the survival of particular social groups in the process of natural selection.
- Behaviours attributable not necessarily to natural selection but to 'social instincts' and 'habits' that some species – especially humans – develop and sustain through transmission from generation to generation.
- Characteristics attributable to 'moral sense' or 'conscience' that uniquely distinguish human beings from the 'lower animals'.

Darwin does not use the word 'altruism' but alludes to the 'sympathy' that some animals (especially humans) evidently feel towards, and the pleasure they take in society with, other members of their own species. He contended, however, that only humans can with certainty be ranked as 'moral beings' (1871: 89). While Darwin and Marx are said to have respectfully 'clashed' with one another (Rejón 2018), there is some element of resonance between their respective accounts of the evolution of the human species. Whether Darwin's notion of 'social instincts' equates with the concept of sociality drawn from Marx's account remains perhaps a moot point. Darwin for his part was quite explicitly influenced not by Marx, but by Kant's understanding of moral duty and went so far as to claim that 'the social instincts – the prime principle of man's moral constitution – with the aid of intellectual powers and the effects of habit – naturally lead to the golden rule' (1871: 106).

Darwin opened an enduring debate. On the one hand, theoretical biologists (e.g. Hamilton, 1964) sought to prove that if there is a gene that increases the likelihood of altruistic/self-sacrificial behaviour in an individual, its transmission could be favoured by natural selection, provided first, that gene is shared within a kinship or population group in such a way that the costs incurred by altruistic group members are reflected in benefits experienced by non-altruistic group members; and secondly, that any reduction in the personal fitness of altruistic group members is compensated by their still being included within the population group. On the other hand, there have been biologists – the most controversial of whom is Richard Dawkins (1976) – who have insisted that in the evolutionary process, self-replicating genes that increase the likelihood of selfish behaviour will always outcompete those genes that increase the likelihood of altruistic behaviour; social groups

manifesting high levels of altruistic genes will inevitably be weakened by the conduct of selfish free-riding individuals; the good of the selfish individual will ultimately, therefore, trump the good of the species. Nevertheless, Dawkins, like Darwin, recognised that the characteristics of human behaviour are culturally as well as genetically transmitted and he coined the term 'meme' to describe a unit of cultural transmission, analogous to the gene as a unit of biological transmission. Dawkins declares that 'Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which in the broad sense, can be called imitation' (1976: 206). Facts and fictions, fables and fashions, but also moral premises, religious beliefs – indeed, the idea of God – can be handed down from generation to generation and spread around within and between different human populations, mutating, adapting and developing as they go.

Memes, unlike genes, do not directly encode the way human beings behave towards each other, but can inflect the ways in which human behaviour evolves. Memes may be analogous to or even constitutive of fetishes. Nevertheless, both concepts retain some wider heuristic value when it comes to understanding subliminal or immanent mechanisms of cultural transmission.

The unresolved genetics *vs*. culture debate has undergone various twists and turns and for our purposes an important distinction has been drawn by Sober and Wilson (1998) between evolutionary altruism and psychological altruism. From an evolutionary perspective, they point out, altruism has nothing to do with the motivation of individuals and relates solely to the substantive outcomes of their behaviour: something of at best limited relevance to interpretations of human history. Psychological altruism, on the other hand, has everything to do with individual motivation and here Sober and Wilson challenge the distinction between egoists whose ultimate aims are self-directed, and altruists some of whose aims may be other-directed. They argue for a concept of motivational pluralism, citing evidence to suggest that natural selection is more likely to have made sentient animals (especially humans) motivational pluralists, rather than pure hedonists. This begs further questions: wherein lies the seat of human motivations and what determines variations in the degree to which individual human beings have sympathy for others?

The brain -vs- the psyche

The study of thinking and feeling has embraced a spectrum of approaches.

Technological developments have enabled neurologists to identify and monitor particular parts or areas within the brain that appear to be associated with different emotions. There are, for example, distinct areas associated with feelings of empathy on the one hand, and compassion on the other. Up to a point, human beings might appear to have been hard-wired for altruism. However, there are other parts of the brain that function to regulate behaviour and control impulses, whose effects may in fact inhibit altruism. Temporarily disrupting the inhibiting mechanism appears to make experimental subjects more generous (Christov Moore, et al. 2017). It has also been possible to demonstrate a difference between empathy (distress when witnessing another person's suffering) and compassion (the desire to relieve such suffering): while feelings of empathy in relation to other people's suffering can be enervating, feelings of compassion towards those who suffer can be energising (Ricard, 2015: ch. 4).

Altruism, like consciousness itself, has been understood not merely as a product of neurological processes, but in terms of mental characteristics or traits. Psychologists cannot agree whether there is such a thing as an 'altruistic personality', though there have nevertheless been

attempts to measure altruistic tendencies (e.g. Rushton, et al. 1981). Psychologists have also undertaken experiments to observe and assess naturally occurring helping behaviour in children and prosocial behaviour in adults. These show that while very young children can be spontaneously helpful, the tendency diminishes as they mature; and while adults may quite readily come to the aid of strangers in minor ways when this involves no immediate cost or stress, the tendency diminishes as the degree of difficulty or risk entailed in aiding others increases (Ricard, 2015: chs. 18 and 19).

Behavioural scientists have drawn on game theory to devise experiments by which to observe and interpret competing self-interested and cooperative behavioural tendencies and to explore, for example, the means by which to 'nudge' people towards prosocial – and implicitly more desirable – behavioural choices (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Between 2001 and 2009 the UK government sponsored a biannual Citizenship Survey, which included questions to assess the extent to which individual citizens engage in voluntary work and/or donate financially to charity. The findings suggested that a significant minority of the population engaged in some form of regular voluntary work and that a majority regularly gave at least something charity, though in some instances the giving of time and money was an incidental component of the donors' recreational or religious pursuits (Drever, 2010). And, as has been remarked above, there is a great deal of research on social attitudes and social values that bears not directly upon the prevalence of altruistic sentiments, but upon fluctuating popular support for state financed health and welfare provision. The picture that emerges is one in which the legitimacy of the capitalist welfare state may depend in part upon moral conceptions of the common good and of social justice, but also upon a self-interested calculus of risk management and cost-benefit. Altruistic sentiments and behaviour are evident in contemporary economically developed societies, albeit ambiguously so.

Psychoanalysts take a different approach to the functioning of the human mind. Freud (1923), most famously, considered the human individual to be fundamentally egotistical and driven by desire, the force of which is tempered by the super-ego (or conscience). He drew on the concept of the fetish to describe a fixation upon a substitute object or activity that a patient might associate with the person or the interaction they most desired. In pathological instances a fetish could be dysfunctional but in others the displacement or sublimation of innate desires could result unconsciously in culturally acceptable or 'healthy' behaviours (Morris, 2017: 214). In later work Freud concluded that our innate desires entail competing erotic and destructive elements. He pessimistically concluded that 'the inclination to aggression is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition in man, and ….. constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization' (1930: 37).

Contradiction and consensus

Recent analyses from psychological and historical perspectives respectively (S. Pinker, 2011; Bregman, 2020), have offered more optimistic interpretations of humanity's future, suggesting that human beings may be becoming less violent, or else that countervailing instincts by which human beings can and do co-operate and trust each other may yet prevail. In sum, however, the weight of established scientific inquiry remains focused on inherent tensions between selfish and altruistic capacities and often portrays altruism as an incidental, residual, inhibited or subliminal factor in human motivation and behaviour.

Doing good for others is good, not necessarily because it is virtuous or obligatory, but because from a utilitarian perspective it can have beneficial social consequences. Altruism is a functional good. Writing from a sociological perspective, Robert Pinker (1971: 211) concluded that

the evolution of welfare institutions in modern industrialised societies represented 'an unstable compromise between compassion and indifference, between altruism and self-interest' and that insofar as human beings 'have enough altruism to accept social restraints upon our more selfish dispositions[,] … [t]he tradition of social welfare is a positive expression of human altruism, albeit tempered with judicious self-regard'. This conclusion, it may be argued, amounts to a dominant consensus. However, Pinker was writing upon the premise that the study of social welfare 'is a study of human nature in a political context'. We might pause and ask, are not human beings primarily social rather than natural beings and is not the practice of politics fundamentally a social activity? To regard altruism as a compensatory counterbalance to the questionably 'natural' disposition of contemporary *homo economicus* elides a definitive characteristic of the human species, namely sociality. If Comte's altruism evoked an ideal of 'living for others', the concept of sociality that may be distilled, *inter alia*, from Marx relates to the material reality that a human life must be lived with and through others.

Conclusion and reflection

It has been argued that altruism, defined from a variety of perspectives, can function as the fetishized mediation of essential human sociality. Pre-modern gift giving, religiously inspired forms of charity and state administered welfare provision appear in different ways to exhibit or embody forms of altruism, yet they obscure the essential sociality to which they may in part give immanent effect. When it comes to the giving of aid to strangers, altruism may in an important sense give expression to sociality, but it is a distorted expression, which distances the Other from the Self; which requires mediation through magic, the grace of God, duties of citizenship, or cultural constructions of individual virtue or self-discipline. There can be no doubt that human beings are capable in everyday life of often extraordinary acts of individual sacrifice or heroism. Based on in-depth interviews with people who have performed such acts, Monroe (1996) has remarked on the modest and matter-of fact way in which each of these heroes expressed an unquestioning recognition of a shared common humanity. We might nevertheless question whether such exceptional instances manifest or attest to 'The Heart of Altruism' (as Monroe asserts), although they can clearly be recognised as individual expressions of inherent human sociality. There is ample evidence that many people will sometimes and in different ways support good causes, but this does not amount to a collective acceptance of human interdependency.

A full and collective realisation of human sociality, as defined and discussed above, remains far from complete. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin asserted that:

> As [humanity] advances in civilisation, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that [they] ought to extend [their] social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to [them]. This point being once reached, there is only an *artificial barrier* to prevent [their] sympathies extending to the [persons] of all nations and races. (1871: 100-101) [*emphasis added and non-gender specific nouns and pronouns substituted*]

The 'artificial barrier' to which Darwin alludes continues to be manifested even within the boundaries of welfare states, as well as beyond. And 'simplest reason' might now tell us that the

future of social policy cannot depend on harnessing individual altruism and kindness but must foment the recognition of the universal interdependency of the human species. Such recognition demands a shift of consciousness that is not readily achievable under currently prevailing capitalist relations of production and exchange. We live at a time when the climate emergency and geo-political instabilities threaten the future of humanity; when global poverty and inequalities continue to increase; when populist and nationalist political movements are everywhere on the rise; when established welfare states are experiencing cost of living crises and unprecedented pressures on health and social care provision, leading to a return to charitable rather than state provision (e.g. food banks, crowd-funding initiatives to pay for 'deserving' individual causes).

Nevertheless, that shift of consciousness entails in part a conceptual gestalt switch by which to transcend fetishized or illusory perceptions as to the basis upon which everyday individual wellbeing is attained. Such a switch is portended in diverse ways through, for example, emerging humanist perspectives described as 'reparative' (Gilroy 2014), 'radical' (H. Dean 2020; Plummer 2021) or simply 'new' (Williams 2021) humanistic perspectives. For the purposes of this article, however, the 'switch' is not simply from individual do-gooding to collective commitment, but from the perception of selective injustices that affect others, to a perception of the human interdependencies that affect and define us all; from a calculus of utilitarian value to a realisation of human needs. The practical implication in terms of social welfare might be reflected in assumptions favouring: unconditional relief for all refugees; collectively accountable mechanisms and resources to ensure adequate and sustainable distribution of food, energy, housing and healthcare throughout the whole of humanity; effective and sustained support for the provision of social care within households and communities and by means of humane and responsive professional services; the promotion of lifelong educational processes by which every human individual can not only achieve full personal and social development, but also realise their creative potential so as to become and continue to be a social actor with a meaningful part to play in the life they share with others. Self-evidently these are ambitious goals, for which motivation may be found and whose substance may be debated and elaborated through a switch in perception.

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