The Norm of Self-Interest

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The self-interest motive is singularly powerful according to many of the most influential theories of human behavior and the layperson alike. In the present article the author examines the role the assumption of self-interest plays in its own confirmation. It is proposed that a norm exists in Western cultures that specifies self-interest both is and ought to be a powerful determinant of behavior. This norm influences people's actions and opinions as well as the accounts they give for their actions and opinions. In particular, it leads people to act and speak as though they care more about their material self-interest than they do. Consequences of misinterpreting the "fact" of self-interest are discussed.

With the publication of Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes (1651/1950) enthroned self-interest as the cardinal human motive, a status it enjoys to this day (Schwartz, 1986). The sovereignty of the self-interest motive has not gone unchallenged, of course. Critics have charged that the power accorded self-interest, especially by neoclassical economics, promotes a misleading and impoverished view of the human agent that is as dangerous as it is demeaning. A more adequate view of human agent, dissenters contend, acknowledges the power of many additional, sometimes dominating, motives, such as public spiritedness (Etzioni, 1988; Mansbridge, 1994), empathy (Batson, 1991; Kohn, 1990), commitment (Sen, 1977), and justice (Lerner, 1980; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997).

That the explanatory power of the self-interest assumption has been the major focus of the self-interest debate is understandable, but it has also proven limiting. In particular, it has forestalled consideration of the theory's causal power—a serious omission, as the assumption of self-interest is not simply an abstract theoretical concept but a collectively shared cultural ideology (Kohn, 1990; Lerner, 1982; Miller & Ratner, 1996; Sampson, 1983; Wallach & Wallach, 1983). Demonstrating that the theory of self-interest has causal power—specifically, that it plays a role in its own confirmation—is the main objective of this article.

Scientific theories, by generating self-knowledge and self-images, are always at risk of becoming self-fulfilling (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1973, 1982; Schwartz, 1997; Wallach & Wallach, 1983). Nowhere would this risk seem greater than in the case of the self-interest assumption, for the image of humans as being predominantly self-interested is central not only to neoclassical economics but to many other influential theories of human behavior, including evolutionary biology, behaviorism, and psychoanalytic theory (Etzioni, 1988; Kohn, 1990; Schwartz, 1986; Wallach & Wallach, 1983). Indeed, the self-fulfilling properties of the self-interest assumption have frequently been commented on (Kagan, 1989; Kohn, 1990; Lerner, 1982; Schwartz, 1997).

How exactly does the assumption that humans are self-interested become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Previous analyses of the self-fulfilling impact of the self-interest assumption have focused on the role that the theory plays in the structuring and configuring of social institutions (Etzioni, 1988; Kohn, 1990; Lerner, 1982; Schwartz, 1997). According to these arguments, the image of humans as being self-interested leads to the creation of the kinds of social institutions (e.g., workplaces, schools, governments) that transform the image into reality. The present analysis accepts the premise that a positive feedback loop exists between theory and social structure and that this loop contributes importantly to theory confirmation (Schwartz, 1997). I seek to go further, however, and show that scientific theory also impinges on individual consciousness and interpersonal behavior. More specifically, I attempt to show that the theory of self-interest has spawned a norm of self-interest, the consequence of which is that people often act and speak in accordance with their perceived self-interest solely because they believe to do otherwise is to violate a powerful descriptive and prescriptive expectation.

Defining the Norm of Self-Interest

The norm of self-interest prescribes that people pursue their self-interest but, more than this, it prescribes that they pursue their self-interest narrowly defined. To satisfy the strictures of the self-interest norm, people's actions must conform to, at least crudely, the strictures of neoclassical economic theory. Acting so as to maximize positive emotions (e.g., pride) or minimize negative emotions (e.g., guilt) while meeting many definitions of self-interested behaviors (see Mansbridge, 1990b) does not meet the stan-
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Standards of most rational choice models nor, as we shall see, those of the self-interest norm. The latter requires that the interests motivating people be material ones (e.g., economic profit).

Consider the act of donating to charity as an example. It is often claimed that acts of this type, even anonymous ones, are self-interested because they serve various psychological interests of the self, such as self-esteem enhancement or guilt reduction (Frank, 1988; Mansbridge, 1990b). Such motivational constructions, however, do not satisfy the logic of most rational choice models (e.g., Mueller, 1979; Olson, 1965), because the fact that actors “feel good” after contributing to a public good (e.g., a new museum) is of no material consequence to them. Indeed, according to many rational choice models, the only truly rational action taken with respect to public goods is to partake of them without contributing to them—after all, public goods exist whether one contributes to them or not.¹ The norm of self-interest does not go so far as to mandate that people eschew charitable donation in favor of free riding, but it has, as we shall see, led the layperson to feel increasingly uncomfortable donating to charity in the absence of a tangible quid pro quo.

The Layperson as Self-Interest Theorist

If a scientific theory is to exert power over people’s behavior, its validity must be widely acknowledged. This precondition certainly seems to be met in the case of the self-interest assumption, for the belief in the power of self-interest, far from being confined to theoreticians closeted in ivory towers, is held, in some form or another, by people in all segments of society: politicians, policy analysts, educators, captains of industry, athletic coaches, and, most importantly, the layperson. That the average person is a self-interest theorist, and one in the neoclassical mode at that, is well-documented in general surveys (Kohn, 1990; Wuthnow, 1991) as well as in more systematic studies (Miller & Ratner, 1996, 1998). For example, the layperson believes that people’s attitudes and behaviors are highly influenced by monetary incentives as well as by other personal stakes (Miller & Ratner, 1996, 1998). Thus, people who would benefit materially from the implementation of a social policy are expected to have more favorable attitudes toward that policy than are people who would not. Similarly, those offered financial compensation for undertaking a socially beneficial act (e.g., giving blood) are expected to be more willing to undertake it than are those who are not. The most impressive evidence that individuals are self-interest theorists is the finding that the predictive power they accord self-interest is largely unaffected by the explanatory power it has for their own behavior. Even when people’s own attitudes toward a social policy are incongruent with their acknowledged level of vested interest in it (either too positive or too negative), they still think that the attitudes of others will be congruent with their self-interest (Miller & Ratner, 1998).

The finding that laypersons believe fervently in the power of self-interest to shape attitudes and behaviors will strike few as surprising, certainly not those social scientists who adhere to the central assumptions of rational choice theory (see Green & Shapiro, 1994). However, it should give pause to anyone familiar with the large body of research showing consistently weak links between self-interest and social attitudes (see Sears & Funk, 1990, 1991). The small actual effects of self-interest stand in sharp relief to the substantial assumed effects of self-interest and as such pose a puzzle: How is it that people come to embrace the theory of self-interest when everyday life provides so little evidence of it? To answer this question, a closer examination of self-interest rhetoric is in order.

The Origins of the Layperson’s Belief in the Self-Interest Motive

Knowledge pertaining to the relative power of different motives is acquired through the same means as are other forms of social knowledge: instruction and experience. Consider first how instruction might foster the belief in the potency of self-interest. Every culture, through its scientific theories, provides its members with answers to fundamental questions about the nature of the human condition (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Shweder, 1991). As Schwartz (1997) described this process, “science creates concepts, ways of understanding the world and our place in it, that have enormous effect on how we think and act” (p. 21). Few questions about the nature of the human condition are as important as that of the source of human action, and most cultures forge collective representations

¹ Defining self-interest psychologically also seems personally unconvincing to rational choice practitioners—at least, research shows that economists donate significantly less to charities than do members of other professions (Frank, Gilovich, & Regan, 1993).
that specify both what does motivate people (descriptive theories) and what should motivate people (prescriptive theories). The dissemination of these collective representations takes both direct and indirect routes.

**Direct instruction.** Repeated instruction (whether at the parent’s knee or in the classroom) on the power of self-interest is unlikely to be lost on its audience. Unfortunately, there has been very little research on the extent or effect of socialization of this type. What evidence there is, however, suggests that self-interest motivation can indeed be taught. For example, Frank et al. (1993) demonstrated that efforts to evangelize on behalf of the self-interest motive can produce converts even among those who could be assumed to already have strong theories of human motivation (i.e., college students).

The specific question addressed by Frank et al. (1993) was this: Does exposing college students to the precepts and findings of rational choice theory influence the power they perceive self-interest has, or at least should have, over their own lives and that of the average other? The researchers examined this question by assessing students’ responses at both the beginning and end of the semester to two ethical dilemmas (“Would you return a lost envelope with $100 in it?” and “Would you report a billing error that benefited you?”). Students were members of one of two different microeconomics classes or of a class unrelated to economics (astronomy). Of the economics classes, one was taught by an instructor who specialized in game theory (a field in which self-interest is axiomatic), the other, by an instructor who specialized in economic development in Maoist China. The results supported the hypothesis that studying economics can foster self-interest. Over the course of the semester, the responses of students in the game theorist’s class increased in self-interest more than did those of students in the other economist’s class; these latter students’ responses, in turn, increased more in self-interest than did those of students in the control (astronomy) professor’s class. Similar changes emerged on measures assessing students’ expectations of the actions of the average person.

The most significant finding of Frank et al. (1993) for the present analysis is that the experience of taking a course in microeconomics actually altered students’ conceptions of the appropriateness of acting in a self-interested manner, not merely their definition of self-interest. Instruction in economics, it would appear, does not make cynics out of students by persuading them that the motivation behind people’s actions, whatever it appears to be, is necessarily self-interest. Frank et al.’s (1993) participants did not emerge from Economics 101 believing that it actually is in one’s self-interest to report a favorable billing error because, for example, it preempts guilt or fosters a reputation for honesty. Rather, they emerged apparently believing that not reporting a favorable billing error, in addition to being self-interested, is also the rational and appropriate action to take, however guilty one feels doing so.

**Indirect instruction.** One need not take a course in microeconomics to learn about the descriptive and prescriptive power of self-interest, of course. The putative power of self-interest can be communicated much more subtly. For example, myriad daily appeals to the self-interest motive reinforce the belief that this motive should be powerful. More than merely pointing out the instrumental value of a particular activity (e.g., “ethics pay”), these appeals communicate an important message about the virtue of instrumental value: It is good to pursue what pays. Thus, appeals to self-interest, although explicitly pointing to the means by which the goal of self-interest can be achieved, implicitly point to the wisdom and appropriateness of pursuing self-interest (Frey, 1997; Kohn, 1990).

This last point suggests a novel perspective on the finding that people’s sensitivity to their self-interest increases after it has been made salient to them (Green & Cowden, 1992; Sears & Lau, 1983). Pointing out to people where their material self-interest lies may make it salient to them, but it also makes the norm of self-interest salient to them, and it may be due as much to the latter as to the former that this intervention leads them to act more in accordance with self-interest. As an illustration, consider then-candidate Ronald Reagan’s famous refrain in the 1980 U.S. presidential campaign: “Ask yourself, are you better off today than you were four years ago?” This refrain reflected a message as well as a question. In addition to asking voters to reflect on the link between their self-interest and their electoral choice, it instructed them on what should motivate their choice of political candidate—self-interest. In effect, by telling voters that a vote for him would be good for their pocketbook, Reagan was telling them that it was normative to vote on the basis of their pocketbook. It is interesting to note that the correlation between self-interest (defined by personal financial situation) and candidate preference in the 1980 U.S. presidential election was only .08 (Sears & Funk, 1991). However, it rose to a more substantial .36 by 1984 (Lau, Sears, & Jessor, 1990), tempting one to speculate that the tenor of the self-interest-celebrating rhetoric of Reagan’s first term contributed to the social construction of voting behavior (and perhaps to many other aspects of social life) as being something that self-interest does and should dominate. People, it would appear, can be taught to act “naturally.”

**Why Does Personal Experience Not Invalidate Self-Interest Indoctrination?**

Self-interest rhetoric may be ubiquitous in contemporary society, but social science research suggests that this will not be the message of everyday social experience. For example, research suggests that everyday experience should reveal self-interest to be related only weakly, if at all, to people’s attitudes toward social policies (Sears & Funk, 1990, 1991) and to their satisfaction with the outcomes provided by social institutions (Tyler, 1990). However, this assumes that social actors are as comfortable revealing divergences between their self-interest and their attitudes as they are revealing convergences, which, as we shall see, is not the case. The fact is that people’s everyday actions and words exaggerate the actual power self-interest has over them, thereby providing the layperson with spurious “evidence” of the power of self-interest. In this way,
everyday experience not only fails to contradict societal rhetoric but actually reinforces it.

The Norm of Self-Interest and Behavior

Social norms can be defined as shared perceptions of appropriate behavior that possess the power to induce people to act publicly in ways that deviate from their private inclinations (Miller & Prentice, 1996). The norm of self-interest is a case in point: It induces people to act publicly in ways that maximize their material interests, whether or not they are so inclined privately. This norm, like most other norms, reflects both a descriptive belief (people are self-interested) and a prescriptive belief (people ought to be self-interested). Either of these beliefs is sufficient to induce the layperson to act more in line with self-interest than he or she might personally be inclined to do.

The power of the norm of self-interest does not end with its influence on people’s behavior. By influencing behavior and rhetoric, it also influences lay theories as well as more formal theories of human behavior. The reason for this is simply that the layperson (along with the professional observer) frequently interprets evidence of the strength of the norm of self-interest to be evidence of the strength of the motive of self-interest. The consequence of this misinterpretation is a strengthening of the norm itself. How precisely the norm of self-interest contributes to a false impression of the inevitability and naturalness of the self-interest motive is the topic to which we now turn.

Descriptive Power

The expectation that others will act in a particular way frequently leads people to act similarly (see Darley & Fazio, 1980; Miller & Turnbull, 1986; Snyder & Stukas, 1998). There are at least two reasons why the expectation of self-interested behavior from others could lead people to act (contrary to their private preferences) in a self-interested manner themselves and thereby unwittingly provide further evidence of the power of self-interest. One reason people pursue self-interest when they anticipate self-interested behavior from others is the fear that to do otherwise would lead to their exploitation. This dynamic is nicely captured in experimental games where the more individuals expect those with whom they are interacting to pursue a self-interested strategy, the more inclined they are to pursue a self-interested strategy themselves (Bouas & Komorita, 1996; Kelley & Stahelski, 1970; Messé & Sivacek, 1979). The experience of experimental games or any similarly structured social relationship thus reinforces people’s belief that individuals are “out for themselves” and leaves them even more convinced that pursuing a competitive orientation is the rational and appropriate thing to do (Kelley & Stahelski, 1970; Miller & Holmes, 1975).

A second reason people pursue self-interest when they anticipate self-interested behavior from others is the fear that to do otherwise would be a waste of time and effort. This assumption is common in situations where actors must decide whether to undertake action on behalf of a cause they support but in which they, like most potential actors, have no personal stake. Individuals in this circumstance tend to assume that their supportive position is not shared by others and hence that any action of theirs is likely to be solitary and ineffectual (Miller & Ratner, 1998). As Coontz (1992) described this dynamic, “The major barrier to social involvement is not people’s commitment to a purely individualistic way of life but their feeling of helplessness, the fear that they are the only people who feel this way” (p. 284).

Prescriptive Power

The descriptive component of the norm of self-interest primarily affects behavior by influencing an actor’s calculation of the material consequences of deviating from a self-interested course of action. In contrast, the prescriptive component of the norm of self-interest primarily affects behavior by influencing the actor’s calculation of the social consequences of deviating from a self-interested course of action. The fear that deviating from one’s material self-interest will provoke dismay, suspicion, or derogation can be as powerful a deterrent as the fear that it will prove futile or render one vulnerable to economic exploitation.

For an example of how the prescriptive component of a self-interest norm can affect behavior, consider once again the experimental game context. A reliable finding in this context is that decisions made by groups tend to be more self-interested than those reached by individuals (Schopler & Insko, 1992). The traditional explanation for this finding points to the feelings of anonymity and diffusion of responsibility experienced by individuals in groups. Ratner (1999), however, has speculated that enhanced self-interest in groups may actually reflect the prescriptive component of the self-interest norm, reasoning that even if people themselves are comfortable pursuing a non-self-interested course in such a situation, their belief that their teammates are not leads them to embrace a competitive team strategy. Supporting her speculation, Ratner (1999) found participants in an experimental game believed that their teammates were less comfortable with a cooperative strategy than they themselves were, and this belief led the individuals to play more competitively when their outcomes and those of their teammates were interdependent.

People’s wish to avoid the disapproval of peers and observers is not the only reason they conform to the norm of self-interest. Even when deviation would neither affect them nor be known by anyone else, actors might still override their private preferences and conform to the dictates of narrowly defined self-interest simply because they have internalized the belief that it is appropriate and rational to do so (Tyler, Hsu, & Lind, 1999). Thus, although research consistently demonstrates that even positive material outcomes (e.g., high grades) can leave people upset if they are produced by procedures that people consider unfair, most people are reluctant to express their dissatisfaction in these circumstances, because they have internalized the belief that one ought not to be upset when the bottom line favors the self (Greenberg, 1987). Of course, by concealing from public view their dissatisfaction with unfairly produced
positive outcomes, people only provide further evidence of the (social) fact that people are self-interested.

**The Norm of Self-Interest and Accounts for Behavior**

The norm of self-interest influences more than the actions people take and the attitudes they express. It also influences the accounts people provide for their actions and opinions (Mills, 1963). The easiest way to avoid the negative reactions behavioral and attitudinal deviations from material self-interest provoke is simply to refrain from taking such actions or expressing such attitudes. However, it is also possible to normalize seemingly deviant actions or opinions by providing accounts for them that emphasize their basis in self-interest (Miller & Ratner, 1996). The prominence of self-interest-speak in behavioral accounts can be seen in the different reasons people provide for their voting preferences at different temporal points. Sears and his colleagues have found that the relation between self-interest and voting behavior is much higher in exit polls than in either pre-election or post-election surveys (Sears & Lau, 1983). Whether people distort their votes in the direction of their self-interest or vice versa, it appears clear that people who have recently cast a vote are motivated to tell a story that closely links their vote with their self-interest (see also Stein, 1990).

People also provide self-interested accounts when asked to explain their attitudes. An interesting example of this is provided by a study in which researchers examined the impact vested interest had on Whites' attitudes toward school busing as a means of achieving racial integration (Green & Cowden, 1992; Sears & Funk, 1990). When asked to explain their position, most opponents of busing focused on narrowly defined self-interest arguments: concern for their children's safety, diminished property values, inconvenience to kids, and so forth (Sears & Funk, 1990). However, the data also indicated that whether or not respondents were parents or property owners had virtually no affect on the likelihood of their expressing an antibusing position. It would appear, then, that although people were comfortable acknowledging to an interviewer that they were opposed to busing, they were not comfortable offering an account for that opposition that did not focus on material self-interest.

People's motivation to make their actions appear self-interested is not limited to the political sphere. They seem motivated to cast even highly pro-social acts in terms of self-interest (Lerner, 1982). For example, on the basis of extensive interviews and surveys, Wuthnow (1991) claimed that although people actually engage in many acts of genuine compassion, they are loathe to acknowledge that these acts may have been motivated by genuine compassion or kindness. Instead, people offer pragmatic or instrumental reasons for them, saying things such as "It gave me something to do" or "It got me out of the house." Indeed, the people Wuthnow interviewed seemed to go out of their way to stress that they were not a "bleeding heart," "goody two-shoes," or "do-gooder."

On the basis of Wuthnow's findings, it would appear that accounts for actions that emphasize self-interest, rather than diminishing the actions, actually may normalize or license them. Self-interest provides a sufficient account for what might otherwise seem inexplicable. Interestingly, the claim that people—at least Americans—often conceal their more noble sentiments under the guise of self-interest is not new. Over 150 years ago, the French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville observed that "Americans . . . enjoy explaining almost every act of their lives on the principle of self-interest . . . I think that in this they often do themselves less than justice, for sometimes in the United States, as elsewhere, one sees people carried away by the . . . spontaneous impulses natural to man. But the Americans are hardly prepared to admit that they do give way to emotions of this sort" (1835/1969, p. 546).

**Why Does Self-Interest Predict Behavior Better Than Attitudes?**

Self-interest, as we have seen, does not fare well at predicting people's attitudes toward social policies. It fares much better, however, at predicting social action. Consider a study by Regan and Fazio (1977). This study found no relation between undergraduates' attitudes regarding the circumstances of a campus housing shortage at their university and whether the students were personally inconvenienced by the shortage. All students expressed considerable hostility. This study did find, however, a strong relationship between vested interest and behavior. Undergraduates' willingness to take direct steps to alleviate the problem was highly dependent on whether they were personally inconvenienced by the current policy. A second study that demonstrates the greater impact of self-interest on behavior than on attitudes was reported by Sivacek and Crano (1982). This study found that college students who were affected most by a proposal to increase the legal drinking age in their state (those who would be prohibited from drinking for two or more years) were no more opposed to the proposal than were students who were affected least by it (those who were close to or already at the proposed new drinking age). The former were more willing to make phone calls to oppose the increase, however. A third relevant study (Green & Cowden, 1992), previously described, found that Whites who owned property or who had school-age children were no more opposed to a school busing policy than were Whites who had no material stake in the policy. The former, however, were much more likely to join antibusing organizations.

How are we to interpret the significantly stronger relation between material self-interest and social action than between material self-interest and social attitudes? One possibility focuses on the different thresholds that must be reached to express an attitude versus to take an action. Although one might not require a vested interest in a cause to express an attitude supporting it, one might require a level of motivation only having a stake in the issue can provide to convert a supportive attitude into a supportive action. As Green and Cowden (1992) have...
argued, the prospect of behavioral involvement (unlike the request for an opinion) forces people to consider cost and hence prompts self-interest reflection. In their words, the potential political actor must first ask him- or herself “Is it worth it?”

That survey research underestimates the “political wallop” of self-interest is certainly one reason why there might be a stronger link between self-interest and behavior than between self-interest and attitudes, but there is another possibility suggested by the self-interest-as-norm analysis. Namely, to the extent that acting without a vested interest is perceived by actors and observers to be norm violating, individuals who support a cause in which they have no stake will be hesitant to take action on behalf of that cause, not because they lack an incentive but because they lack a justification. By this account, the question the political actor needs to answer is not “Is it worth it?” but “Is it appropriate?”

**Self-Interest as Standing**

The existence of a norm of self-interest means that people who lack a stake in a cause will feel uncomfortable taking action on its behalf. However willing they might be to invest time and money on a cause’s behalf, people will be inhibited from doing so if they feel it is not their place to act. The judicial concept of legal standing provides an instructive metaphor for this process. According to the United States Supreme Court (Sierra Club v. Morton, 1972), not everyone is entitled to bring forward a case for legal review. To qualify as having legal standing for judicial review, a person must show that he or she has suffered or will suffer some injury, economic or otherwise. So, for example, moral outrage at the injurious behavior of another without demonstrable personal injury would not be sufficient grounds for bringing legal action. Because of this definition of legal standing, it will always be possible to point to the basis in self-interest of any judicial action. Obviously, however, this fact would not be grounds for concluding that the human impulse to right wrongs is invariably confined to wrongs that affect the actor personally. The strength of the relationship between self-interest and legal action says much about the normative position of the court but possibly little about the motivating power of self-interest. A similar claim could be made about the strength of the relationship between self-interest and social action: It says much about the normative position of the court of public opinion but possibly little about the motivating power of self-interest. The court of public opinion declares that a person must have psychological standing (vested interest) to undertake action on behalf of a cause or person. A supportive attitude without a vested interest is insufficient to provoke action. Thus, self-interest, whether in the legal or social domain, may play as big a role in legitimating and justifying behavior as it does in motivating it.

**Providing the Nonvested With Standing**

To the extent that it is their perceived lack of psychological standing that inhibits nonvested individuals from acting on behalf of causes they support, framing the call to action so as to provide these individuals with standing (although not with vested interest) should increase their willingness to act. Individuals on whom standing has been conferred, even if they do not have vested interest, should feel free to act. A recent study by Ratner and Miller (1999) supports this reasoning. Specifically, Ratner and Miller found that nonvested actors who supported a particular cause were much more likely to take action on its behalf when the organization supporting the cause possessed a name that legitimated the involvement of nonvested as well as vested actors. Indeed, when provided with standing by means of the organization’s inclusive title, nonvested actors (who were as supportive of the cause as vested actors) participated at a rate comparable to the vested actors. In summary, at least one reason why nonvested individuals are inhibited from converting their supportive attitudes into supportive actions is that they feel it is “not their place” to act.

**Do Incentives Increase Charitable Donations by Increasing Motivation or Justification?**

If people attribute their pro-social acts to self-interest so as not to appear motivated by compassion, it stands to reason that they would also welcome those opportunities that provided them with self-interested accounts for acting compassionately. This logic may, knowingly or unknowingly, underlie the practice of offering potential charity donors some product (e.g., light bulbs, return address labels, magazine subscriptions) in exchange for their donations. The commonness of this practice suggests the net profit elicited by product-for-donation exchanges exceeds that elicited by strict charity appeals alone. If so, one explanation for the success of the strategy might be that the offer of an exchange creates a fiction that permits people to act on their impulse to help without committing themselves to unwanted psychological burdens, such as a public or private image as a “do-gooder” or an enduring, open-ended relationship with the victim group (Lerner, 1980; Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976; Miller, 1977). In effect, the exchange fiction provides a psychological cover for individuals who wish to express their compassion and concerns with justice without having to reveal, or even recognize, their motives.

In a test of the exchange fiction hypothesis, J. G. Holmes, Miller, and Lerner (1999) had a group of experimenters approach students on a university campus with one of a variety of charity appeals. The design was complicated, so only the most relevant conditions are discussed here. The key manipulations were the seriousness of the victims’ need (high vs. low) and the presence or absence of an exchange (a candle). The pattern of donation rates supported the prediction. When the victims’ need was high (and so presumably was the sympathy they elicited), the offer of an exchange increased people’s donation rate threefold; when the victims’ need was low (and so presumably was the sympathy they elicited), the offer of an exchange had no significant effect.
The J. G. Holmes et al. (1999) study reveals the need for caution when interpreting the link between material incentives and charitable donations. Interpreting this link to suggest that people are disinclined to give if they are not compensated for doing so may be an accurate empirical description (people do give more when they are offered an incentive), but it is not necessarily an accurate psychological interpretation. Incentives, as we have seen, serve not so much to motivate charitable giving as to disinhibit such giving by providing a justification for it. The justificatory role of incentives comes into play when people care about a cause and want to help but are inhibited from doing so, as it appears was the case for the individuals in the high-need condition of the J. G. Holmes et al. study.

In summary, incentives may be a necessary and sufficient factor in charity campaigns, but their role may be more legitimating than motivating. When people receive a quid pro quo (e.g., a tax deduction) for their assistance, they do not have to feel like a do-gooder. They can construe their action as something to feel good about but not as something that is inconsistent with collective representations of what constitutes acceptable forms of motivation. From the perspective of the present analysis, it is the mere existence of an incentive (e.g., a tax deduction), not its size, that is critical in eliciting greater donation rates. To the extent that an incentive provides the excuse for giving, all that is important is that one be offered.

Conclusion

To inquire about the role played by self-interest in human affairs is to inquire about the essence of human nature, which is why this question has sustained debate among social and political theorists for centuries (see Hirschman, 1977; S. Holmes, 1990; Sen, 1977; Smith, 1776/1963). With the rising prominence of rational choice models of behavior in recent decades, the intensity of the self-interest debate has only increased (e.g., Downs, 1957; Mueller, 1979; Olson, 1965). The sweeping claims of these models have provoked a torrent of conceptual and empirical critiques (see Elster, 1986; Mansbridge, 1990a). Rational choice theorists have stood their ground, however, typically either dismissing the cases presented as isolated instances and therefore mere exceptions to the general rule or reinterpreting them so as to render them consistent with the rational (self-interested) position (see Green & Shapiro, 1994).

The significance of the evidence adduced by critics of rational choice theory is an interesting and important question, but it is not the question addressed here. This article addresses the significance of the evidence adduced by the proponents of rational choice theory. The question, in effect, is What are we to make of evidence suggesting that material self-interest is a powerful force in people’s lives? The thesis of the article is that this evidence is inherently ambiguous because the ideology of self-interest, widely celebrated in individualistic cultures, functions as a powerful self-fulfilling force. The assumption of self-interest contributes to its own confirmation in at least two ways. First, individualistic cultures structure their social institutions to reflect their belief that people are naturally disposed to pursue their self-interest, which results in these institutions fostering the very behavior their structure presupposes occurs naturally (Lerner, 1982; Schwartz, 1997). Second, as argued here, individualistic cultures spawn social norms that induce people to follow their material self-interest rather than their principles or passions, whether the latter be noble or ignoble. Stated more boldly, people act and sound as though they are strongly motivated by their material self-interest because scientific theories and collective representations derived from those theories convince them that it is natural and normal to do so. As Kagan (1989) observed, “People treat self-interest as a natural law and because they believe they should not violate a natural law, they try to obey it” (p. 283).

Evidence that material self-interest is powerful, therefore, may speak more to the power of social norms than to the power of innate proclivities. Interpreting the presence of self-interested behavior to suggest that self-interest is inevitable and universal rather than historically and culturally contingent only serves to strengthen the layperson’s belief that pursuing self-interest is normatively appropriate, rational, and enlightened. The result of this is a positive feedback loop: The more powerful the norm of self-interest, the more evidence there is for the theory of self-interest, which, in turn, increases the power of the self-interest norm (Schwartz, 1997). None of this is to say that self-interest, even narrowly defined, is an insubstantial force in human affairs. But, however strong the disposition to pursue material self-interest may be, it is likely not as strong as the prevalence of self-interested behavior in everyday life suggests. Homo economicus, it should not be forgotten, inhabits a social world.

REFERENCES


