



Book Review

ALEXANDER J. FIELD (2001) *Altruistically Inclined? The Behavioral Sciences, Evolutionary Theory, and the Origins of Reciprocity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. ISBN 0-472-11224-4. x-373 pp.

Alexander Field's *Altruistically Inclined?* seeks to explain the origin of human altruism. In undertaking this ambitious project Field employs insights from a variety of disciplines including biology, anthropology, psychology and economics. While the book does not contribute original ideas to any of these disciplines, it provides an excellent overview of topics within each for the reader who is likely a specialist in one area but unfamiliar with the others. Thus the book provides a good introduction to basic game theory for biologists and explains concepts from evolutionary biology in a way that is accessible to social scientists.

According to Field, economists have been reluctant to accept mounting evidence that altruism is a significant factor motivating human behavior. Rational choice models assume agents are self-interested (i.e., wealth maximizers) and jettisoning this assumption renders economics impotent to explain certain phenomena economists would like to explain. Field points out that recognizing altruism as an important force, however, does not mean the assumption of self-interest must be lost entirely. In many instances economic models based on this assumption work extremely well.

In many others though they do not. In particular, individuals do not behave in reality as game theory predicts. In experimental trials of standard Prisoners' Dilemma games, for instance, not all agents play defect (the income maximizing strategy) all the time. Introducing human altruism alleviates this tension; but to introduce altruism we first need an account of its emergence via natural selection.

Field defines altruism as evolutionary biologists have defined it—behavior that decreases the fitness of the individual but improves the fitness of conspecifics. Although altruistic behavior cannot be explained by selection at the individual level, it can be explained via selection at the group level. Thus, as Field importantly points out, while the number of altruists inside a given group may be declining, the population of altruists may be increasing globally. Why? Groups that contain a higher proportion of individuals who are hardwired for altruistic behavior will live longer and propagate more. Such groups are therefore selected over time, accounting for the prevalence of altruism in certain spheres. This idea, imported from evolutionary biology, is the core of the book's argument.

According to Field, explanations of altruistic behavior rooted in reciprocity or social norms can explain these practices as self-enforcing among self-interested actors once they are in usage, but they do not tell us how such practices emerged in the first place. In short, these arrangements describe stable equilibria but cannot account for the origin of these equilibria. The first individuals who exhibit the behaviors that give rise to such practices

would be selected against at the individual level. To explain the emergence of these practices we therefore need selection at the group level.

As noted above Field motivates his work by pointing to the predictive failure of game theoretic models that assume actors are self-interested. The evidence he cites for this comes primarily from experimental trials. The results of experimental economics demonstrate that laboratory subjects cooperate in PD games more than expected, demonstrate fairness in Ultimatum and Dictator games, and so on.

But the reader might legitimately ask how poorly the usual assumption of self-interestedness really performs. After all, even in experimental studies like those cited by Field, half or more of subjects' choices *do* conform to the game theoretic prediction—they behave selfishly. While there is clearly some evidence that contradicts standard theory, for the most part the assumption of self-interest does very well. We must therefore be careful when noting, for instance, that the modal choice of experimental subjects in Dictator games is to split \$10 evenly, not to forget that outside of the lab the average American still contributes less than 5% of his income to charity.

Austrian readers of *Altruistically Inclined?* will be particularly interested in considering how Field's account of altruistic behavior might square with an "Austrian" account of such behavior. Among Austrians, Hayek (1973) has come closest to offering an explanation of altruistic behavior. Although he does not explicitly address its origin, Hayek posits that individuals are hardwired for different behavior in different social arenas. He distinguishes between two types of relationships man has with others in two different spheres of his life—the "atavistic" sphere and the sphere of the "Great Society." The former is characterized by personalized relationships that necessitate cooperative, other-regarding behavior, while the latter consists of impersonal interactions and requires noncooperative, self-interested behavior.

Field's discussion of cognitive modularity, whereby different brain modules instruct different behaviors depending upon the situation an individual confronts can thus be seen as "Hayekian" in its fundamental insight. Furthermore, his group selection-based explanation of the origin of modules dictating altruism in personal spheres and self-interest in impersonal ones complements Hayek's position by providing an evolutionary biological basis for seemingly contradictory predispositions within the same individuals. In fact, although Hayek does not apply the idea of group selection to cognitive modules, his application of natural selection to institutions in the *Fatal Conceit* (1988) has several parallels with the argument put forth by Field.

We can find a related, albeit different "Austrian explanation" for altruistic behavior in Mises. Although he did not concern himself with this question directly, Mises' theory of social cooperation under the division of labor is a fertile ground to dig for the rudiments of an alternative Austrian account of altruism. In particular Mises' broad understanding of the Ricardian Law of Association contains the seeds of a "Misesian" explanation of other-regarding behavior.

Narrowly defined, the Ricardian Law of Association deals only with so-called comparative advantage. It demonstrates the gains from specialization and trade even where one party has an absolute advantage in the production of everything (Ricardo 1821). Mises, however, construed it more broadly to explain the general benefits of widespread social

cooperation based on the division of labor (Mises 1966:160). According to Mises, “The division of labor is the outcome of man’s conscious reaction to the multiplicity of natural conditions” (1966:144). Indeed, “Society [which is the same as cooperation] is the outcome of conscious and purposeful behavior” (Mises 1966:141). For Mises, reason guides our decision to engage in social cooperation. We cooperate because we recognize that it is in our rightly understood interest to do so.

This view suggests that ostensibly altruistic behavior is really no such thing at all. Cooperation that appears to be other-regarding is merely a form of self-interested behavior. Specifically, an individual who acts in a seemingly altruistic way is in fact acting in accordance with his *enlightened self-interest*. While antisocial behavior may benefit the individual in the short run, it ultimately undermines social cooperation under the division of labor—the source of human progress. In the long run it is therefore detrimental to the interests of the individual and society as a whole. Rational individuals acting in their enlightened self-interest recognize this fact and so abstain from antisocial activity. Since as Vernon Smith (1998) has pointed out, experimental subjects cannot check conditioning based on their real world experiences at the door, they cooperate in one-shot Prisoners’ Dilemma games in laboratory environments more than theory would predict.

At least on the surface the “Misesian” account of altruistic behavior does not fit as well with Field’s story as the “Hayekian” account offered above. In lieu of altruistic hardwiring it substitutes enlightened self-interest to explain other-regarding behavior. Furthermore “altruism” in the Misesian account does not satisfy the definition of altruism Field provides from evolutionary biology. In Mises, behaving “altruistically” benefits both the actor and those around him. This type of behavior would be considered mutualistic in Field’s analysis rather than altruistic.

Whether the reader finds the Misesian explanation or that offered by Field more persuasive ultimately revolves around how much confidence one has that people are as enlightened as Mises suggests. One way of bringing these positions closer together would be to apply Field’s group selection argument to the selection of individuals who are predisposed to recognize the benefits of social cooperation under the division of labor and thus act in their enlightened self-interest. In this case, the difference between Mises and Field is reduced largely to a semantic one in which apparently other-regarding behavior is called self-interested on the one hand and altruistic on the other.

There may remain a more substantive difference, however, as to what is motivating cooperative behavior in each case. Under Field’s account we might expect lab subjects, if asked to explain why they cooperated, to indicate that they would “feel bad” if they did not. Under the Misesian account on the other hand we would expect subject responses to indicate an understanding of the greater consequences of defection for social cooperation.

Field’s work is important for Austrians to consider. Particularly through its connection to Hayek’s view about human hardwiring, it should serve as a useful springboard for developing an “Austrian” theory of altruism’s origin. If nothing else, *Altruistically Inclined?* points out that the theory of group selection deserves greater attention from economists than it has received thus far. Austrians it seems, with their unique emphasis on evolution and process, are especially well suited to explore this area.

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