

## COMMENT ON KOLM'S PAPER

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### 1. ECONOMICS AND ETHICS

Many people think that Economics is an immoral discipline. There are two ways in which that is true, and in neither case is it the whole truth. First, and obviously, Economics is not a branch of Ethics, and economists are no better at making moral judgments than anyone else. Secondly, like Jesus Christ the discipline does not recoil from the company of publicans and sinners. It deals with an imperfect world peopled by self-seeking individuals. It does not ask: how can we make the world perfect? It tries to work out how to make it better. Then some clear meaning has to be given to 'better', and that is how we arrive at normative economics. This is a system for arriving at recommendations that are more than mere subjective expressions of taste. Economics has to give a meaning to 'better'. For that reason it is condemned to traverse the border area between technical resource-allocation theory, on the one hand, and ideas about how mankind should live, on the other. Like a traveller near an unmarked border, it often has no good idea in which country it finds itself.

Serge-Christophe Kolm has done an excellent job in explaining how economists proceed. He is particularly good at elucidating the relationship and differences between preferences, a utility measure of those preferences, and the philosophy that goes by the name of utilitarianism. Respecting preferences can be no bad thing in suitable circumstances. In many societies it is taken for granted that personal preference can be given free reign where the choice of a marriage partner as concerned (at least if a male is exercising his preference).

Even the statement that Economics is not Ethics is itself a simplification. In truth the boundary between Science and Ethics is never absolute. If it is not entirely for scientists to decide which research programmes

should be pursued, they are uniquely placed to appreciate in full the probable effects on humanity of certain programmes. Ethics is not just an abstract formal discipline. It needs the quantitative assessment of consequences to weigh choices. For that reason economists are duty bound to take positions while never, it is hoped, disguising their personal political positions as Science.

## 2. NON-ECONOMIC MAN (AND WOMAN)

In his essay Serge-Christophe Kolm pays attention to 'sympathy'. This is the habit of humankind of feeling and acting towards others in a non-selfish manner. It is perhaps one of the most striking features of humanity. Modern biological theory teaches that all apparent examples of altruistic behaviour in animals are in fact selfish from the genetic point of view. The late great W.D. Hamilton of the Zoology Department of my own university established *Hamilton's Law*. This says that an animal's willingness to risk its own life for another animal depends entirely on how many genes it shares with that individual. A mother will fight hard to protect an infant, which has half her genes, but not as hard as a bee will fight to protect the entire hive, whose members, because of the strange biology of social insects, share all his genes.

When we look at humanity, Hamilton's Law does not apply. The Christian Gospels present us with many of Jesus' parables. They offer us a special sharp view of the historical Jesus, because they are unlikely to have been edited, and their very peculiarity, such as the use of agricultural illustrations, indicates authenticity. None is more striking than the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a direct answer to the question: 'Who is my neighbour?' The story contrasts selfish individuals (economic men) who pass by their helpless compatriot, with the Samaritan (a despised enemy) who stops and helps. That this story is not ridiculous illustrates that human beings are not wholly driven by selfish genes. We commit suicide, practice contraception, and the Good Samaritan does not pass by on the other side.

That is not to say that Jesus' story is easy to hear. Very rarely do Christians take the Gospels seriously, because if one does they are *too frightening*. The parable says that your enemy is your neighbour. And Jesus tells us that a man who looks upon a woman to lust after her *has already committed adultery*. The young man who asked Jesus what he had to do to attain eternal life was told that to be perfect he had to sell everything and

give it to the poor. He went away sorrowful, because he had great possessions. Surely Jesus understood, for he knew about imperfection. The company of publicans and sinners would have educated him in that regard.

### 3. THE ESSENCE OF HUMANITY

What I have said already will make it clear to some extent why I am extremely unhappy with the ideas that go under the name of socio-biology. Viewing human beings as gene-driven *automata* neglects what is striking, and from the point of view of biology, distinctive, about humankind. Crucial to these differences is elaborate language, and the self consciousness that comes with it. We can experience Serge Kolm's sympathy because we can think: 'What would it be for me to suffer like that'. Even higher animals cannot do that.

Aristotle described man as the *rational* animal. To judge that claim, we have to state clearly what rationality entails. I offer the following definition. Rationality involves observing the world around and learning from it. Notice that this definition immediately implies that no belief by itself can ever be condemned as necessarily irrational. Consider the following tale. Looking out of my window one night, I observe my neighbour dancing naked by the light of the moon. Is he irrational? There is no way of knowing. Next day I confront him. 'Why do you dance naked in your garden, Joe?' 'Because it makes my garden vegetables grow better', he replies. Is he irrational? It remains uncertain. I press him further. 'Why do you believe that, Joe?' If he replies: 'It is self-evident', then I have reason for the first time to suspect that he may be irrational. I show Joe the results of a massive study, carried out by Oxford University, into the effect of naked dancing on vegetable growth, which finds that there is no effect. If he says that he has no interest in such a study, as he knows that it must be wrong, then I am now sure that he is irrational. He is like the Aristotleans who refused to look through Galileo's telescope, as irrational as it is possible to be.

If you accept my account of rationality, it has notable implications for Aristotle's definition. Observing the world around and learning from it is something that animals do all the time. Apes do it; rodents do it, think of the famous laboratory rats; even wild birds do. In Britain milk is delivered to doorstops with the bottles sealed by aluminium-foil caps. Birds have learnt to peck holes in the caps to get to the cream. So if rationality does not distinguish man from other animals, what does? I propose this defini-

tion: *man is a potentially-altruistic animal*. I stress the word potentially, because plainly most human beings most of the time are not altruistic at all. But we can do it, and animals cannot. A lioness teaches her cubs how to hunt, and she shows them how to strip meat from the carcass of a hunted animal. She cannot, however, and she does not attempt to, teach her young to share meat fairly with her smallest and weakest cub. Each cub takes what it can get, the weak cub gets little food, and soon dies. Contrast this with a human mother, who takes special care of a sickly child, and teaches its siblings to do likewise.

When I discussed my ideas with Joseph Stiglitz, he remarked that the generous behaviour just described is only possible because we are rich. I agree with that point, but more has to be said about it. It surely is the case that when human beings are desperately poor, their behaviour frequently becomes less human and more animal. Yet the fact that we are often rich itself distinguishes us from animals, because it says that we are not powered by a relentless Malthusian drive to reproduce to the maximum extent possible. If one takes an animal population, and provides resources for it on a hugely generous scale, it does not remain rich for long. Its numbers increase rapidly until the resources are no longer abundant.

#### 4. THE LIMITS TO ALTRUISM

We live in unusually selfish times. It is not that people are more selfish than they used to be. Rather selfishness is more highly regarded than has typically been the case in the past. This can be accounted for to a great extent by the collapse of Communism and the failure of some parallel socialist experiments. In theory Communism abolished selfishness, and turned men into social insects dedicated to the common good. That was a big lie. Aside from the fact that it denied the corrupt self-interest of communist leaders, it also de-humanized ordinary people by denying them the natural human drive to improve the situation of self and family. Naked capitalism, which makes self-interest everything, appears attractive in contrast.

Yet surely this will be a passing phase of history. Man does not live by selfishness alone, and ultra-capitalist societies do not work particularly well. Witness in this regard the gross failure of the rich US to provide effective medical care for a large slice of its population. Every time we place too much emphasis on one aspect of mankind, the neglect of another aspect comes to the surface. What we see then is an imperfect and oddly incon-

sistent human nature. We cannot evade an answer to the question: who is my neighbour? It is tempting to say that all humanity should be our neighbours, with each unknown Chinese weighed equally with a cousin. The trouble is that people who assert that they feel the pains of all humanity too frequently treat people close to them atrociously. The example of Bertrand Russell springs to mind.

Look at the response to the recent Tsunami disaster. Vast sums of money were donated by people in rich countries to help distant anonymous people. The same donors too often support cruel unhelpful policies towards local gypsies or asylum-seekers. We are publicans and sinners. The problem for Economics is to design policies that work effectively in our sad imperfect world.