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Reply to Rati Mekvabishvili's 'On the Importance of Altruism, Prosocial Behavior and Christian Love in Behavioral Economics research'

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Have Christians cornered the market on love?

As an economist studying love for more than a decade, I was intrigued by this paper's title. Its title promises, at least, a literature review of the scholarly contributions of economists regarding what have been collectively called "other-regarding preferences" by whiteboard-scribbling theorists, or might more informatively be referred to in a way decipherable by the man on the street as "love" or "care." Whether the author was to embark upon a literature review of works self-describing as being about these things (or that the author viewed as being about these things), or whether the author was going to sleuth out evidence of love in the hearts of the generators of economic research by poring over their writings, or even how exactly the generic word "importance" was going to be defined, I didn't know. I began to read, alert and open to being led towards connections I might not have made already between, particularly, the Christian understanding of love and the understandings of it suggested by the dismal science of (behavioural) economics. I was therefore quite unprepared for the author's method of investigation, and even more unprepared for his conclusion. He writes in the abstract that "altruism and Christian love are not only diverse, but contradictory concepts," and that "altruism and pro-sociality...both are ultimately self-oriented." By process of deduction then, Christian love is NOT "self-oriented," meaning that the well-worn Homo Economicus model of selfish pursuit of own gain fails to capture only one of these three allegedly distinct dimensions of seemingly "irrational" feeling or behaviour – altruism, pro-sociality, and Christian love – and from the sounds of things, this One True Love is something from which non-Christians are excluded.

The author, at the first post, thus purports to have the power unilaterally to redefine the main words that form the focus of his work. This is not a conceit unique to the author; economists regularly apply sleights-of-hand to accepted definitions in order to try to "own" things that are bigger than the discipline at present can accommodate. Ideas like love, identity, and power are leading examples of this, as discussed at length in Foster and Frijters 2022. In the present work, the author wishes us to accept his definitions of "love" (the only "unselfish" motive, and only definable in a Christian context) and of "altruism" (an opportunistic behaviour that emerges, yielding good for another person, only when the altruist has received or expects good favour himself). Yet these terms simply cannot, by force of the author's will alone, be redefined. Readers will not allow him that much power.

The Secular Stagnation

Semantics aside, I agree wholly with the author's contextualising contention that the canon of mainstream economic theory is in something of an existential crisis, being shown up regularly by today's practicing economists for its formal models' lack of verisimilitude. This leads to a hunt within the profession for methods of reconciling the primary assumptions of mainstream models with real human behaviour, and thereby justifying both the content of first-year economics courses and much of the research from the economics academy. The author is correct in his observation that some economic theorists looking for a solution to this crisis have turned to interdisciplinary research, and the author isolates evolutionary theory in particular as a seductive area for economic theorists looking to explain the "rationality" of apparently unselfish behaviour. By this choice and his ensuing statements, the author reveals himself not to adhere to the primary tenets of evolutionary theory, and instead to believe in the value of reconciling economic models of human behaviour with what he terms "theology." How can this proceed, he asks, if most economic theorists subscribe to the theory of evolution and, he assumes, are uninterested in attempts to reconcile their assumptions with or link their work to ideas about God? The author's essential proposal is that evolutionary arguments are inadequate to explain altruism and that therefore, without God, economists' capacity to comprehensively explain human behaviour, selflessness and all, will die on the vine.

Reading on, in spite of the author's significant struggles with the English language, I found a competent and at times quite thoughtful review of much of the now-standard thinking of economists about pro-sociality. The most influential works of the last 20 to 30 years are cited by the author, as are seminal works from the 1960s and 1970s by Hamilton (kinship theory) and Trivers (reciprocal altruism) that still guide much research today about why humans sometimes feel and act in ways that seem misaligned with their personal self-interest. The author also reviews the line of literature examining the development of cultural norms and the triumph of some norms over others, in what is often termed a process of "cultural evolution." In particular, he notes that in such a paradigm, altruism can only be sustained as a norm if some members (called "strong reciprocators") are willing to punish others for acting selfishly. This, and other theories' similar reliance on some type of relation or interaction in order to sustain altruism, he sees as a core weakness – one that leads to secular puzzlement about why altruism in the human species is observed even between strangers.

While slightly over-stated, the author's observation that "a society and economy dominated by prosocial behaviour among individuals are much more efficient" accords with the generally accepted contention, even in secular social science, that it is cheaper to program people not to do the wrong thing than to police them. Marrying this with his review of the frameworks economists have used to try to understand apparently unselfish behaviour, the author concludes that while humanity evidently benefits from unselfishness, "the unanswered question remains as to where the altruist comes from and how the criteria emerged by which she can distinguish altruistic behaviour from selfish and fair from unfair behaviour." How refreshing to see an economist admit this total failure of our discipline to engage with the core question of how altruism arises! But the best was yet to come.

Pivot to God

This is where the paper takes a courageous and intriguing turn. The author invites us next to accept the proposition that all science is conducted by people who hold ideologies – whether secular or theological – and that on this basis one should not dismiss or denigrate the efforts of a scientist who looks to theology for guidance on the scientific puzzles he faces. In his words: “any theoretical economic doctrine has an ideological content, which is product of creative thinking of men of certain [sic] moral and value system.” While not commonly confessed in scientific circles, the notion that *ex ante* beliefs unavoidably guide scientific pursuit is unarguable. We scientists do not stop to prove the validity of every prior conclusion on which we base our present work: we take them, hopefully after some reflection but nearly never after first-hand replication, to be roughly correct. In other words, we “believe” them – as fervently as our present author believes in his God. Some of these beliefs derive from conclusions written in books and articles, some derive from what others (such as our parents or our friends) have told us is true, and some derive merely from our own introspection. Some may well have to do with morality and with what the author here terms “values.”

Returning to the problem of altruism, the author notes that generations of scientific philosophers have opined that care for others is hard-wired into humans. I am reminded of that foundational observation of Adam Smith, from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759):

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.

On this basis, our author asks, how then is it tenable to hold a belief that altruism “evolved” (via culture for example) – if it was already there, a core “principle” “in his nature”?

Then begins the author’s review of Christian writing about God and about love. While stating that both of these entities – which he views, as many Christians do, as one and the same – are beyond the ken of people to understand, and therefore side-stepping entirely any interrogation of how they come about, he does point to a method of experiencing them. He advises that someone wanting to experience love should “liberate” himself from his “passions,” which is achieved by a process of mental control, and should not seek to experience any emotion together with the love, since that would not yield a “pure” love. He reassures the reader that “the seed of love” need not be taught but is rather built into us from the start, together with “the desire to have a relationship with God,” and needs merely the right behaviours (specifically, adherence to the Commandments) and God’s help (“grace”) to develop. The author contends that loving some people more than others is a sign of “incomplete love,” that lesser love inevitably becomes hatred, and that selfishness is the result of the “brokenness” of a person.

A strong sense of judgment, not to say fire-and-brimstone dogma, invades the authors’ prose from this point onwards. We are told about right love and “wrong love”; about “sin” and how it creates a self that cannot distinguish between right and wrong; about the corrupting danger of not putting God at the centre of one’s internal universe; and about the universality of sociability, core morality, cooperation, and deep wisdom that all people and cultures share – ostensibly because they were all created by the same hand.

The crux of the author's argument is that "[t]he Christian love of neighbor is one-sided, unconditional and selfless, expects nothing in return" – unlike altruism and pro-sociality, depicted by secular social science as conditional at some level on reciprocation, and moreover as behavioural traits that strengthen and recede as cultures grow and fade. In addition, altruism, he contends, cannot be extended to those outside one's own group: "Christian love does not divide people into groups or as "others", as altruists does so [sic]." He writes further that "[a]ltruism belongs to human instincts and the part of soul, while Christian love belongs to the spiritual part of human nature," and hence that the latter is the purest form of love, the only true love, that is moreover only experienced by, and experienceable by, human beings and only because of God.

God or Bust?

The best scientists, one may argue, are those who constantly question and try to test their own prior beliefs. Charles Darwin himself was perhaps the best example of this. He lived through what could reasonably be called an existential crisis when putting together his theory, knowing how heretical it was, and having been raised in religious traditions that entreated him to believe in Creation. He wondered whether he would be disowned by friends and family for daring to suggest an alternative belief system – one grounded in the empirical observations he had felt compelled to keep making to satiate his rapacious curiosity about where species in all their wondrous variety came from. One might say that Darwin was not satisfied with the *ex ante* belief system he had been fed by his teachers, and reached for something different. In a similar way, our present author is not satisfied with what modern economics, even in its interdisciplinary flavours, has proposed that we should believe about altruism. He feels it is lacking – and so do I.

Yet this does not imply that the only appropriate, scientific, or justified alternative to present approaches, evolutionary or otherwise, is to turn towards theological answers. One might just as well seek answers (read, beliefs on which to found new theories about altruism) in the gods of the forests and rivers, or in the Buddha, or in the Jewish or Muslim gods. The author offers no reason that his beliefs in particular are the right ones. He merely asserts this. Now, one may claim that this is exactly what many social scientists do as well in relation to the theory of evolution, and one would be right about that. Yet evolution is a theory for which evidence is sought in the empirical realities perceived by Darwin and generations of scientists after him. If it is not proven for sure – a point I concede – then it is surely proven more fully than a theory about the existence and nature of any of the supernatural beings that various religions the world over have variously claimed to exist but for which evidence in empirical reality is absent.

A secular scientist might view the Christian worldview not as evidently correct because it has survived for a long time, but rather as an unusually useful worldview which survived the test of time over millenia due to its efficiency and power in suiting humans' needs. Societies are more peaceful and hence productive when people do not hate one another; as such, how useful is the Christian teaching of love for one another. People love to be loved; as such, how useful is the Christian teaching that some all-powerful entity somewhere loves us unconditionally. Children need to be taught right from wrong; as such, how useful is a canonised set of diktats to which harried parents can merely refer without having to field uncomfortable questions from inquisitive young scientists-in-the-crib. Religions of many stripes, not only the Christian one, have proven

themselves in such ways to provide the comfort, security, and meaning that people clearly do require in order to develop their potential and find happiness.

Yet, is a belief in God the only way to satisfy these needs? The literature on what makes people happy has found that a primary driver of self-reported satisfaction with life is the quality of our relationships (see, amongst many others, Polenick et al. 2018, Proulx et al. 2007, and Tough et al. 2018). A relationship with a believed-in supernatural being is one option for this, but one might additionally or instead have relationships with living people (the type of relationship most studied in the existing happiness literature), with one's deceased relatives, with the overarching concept of "humanity", or even with concepts broader than our species, like "the community of mammals". Such relationships occur all in the mind, as does one's relationship with a god, and all are a priori contenders for the role of satisfying the deep human need for comfort, security, meaning, and connection with something bigger than ourselves. As the author says of the "abstract person" with whom a particular non-God-knowing person may build a relationship that provides him with moral guidance, "[i]t is obvious that such an abstract person does not exist and cannot exist." Just like God, then, the atheist may reasonably retort – and besides, so what, if the fiction is useful to people?

Many and various belief systems that guide morality are held by peoples all over the world, yet the author presents a cripplingly narrow and uncharitable characterisation of the way that "altruists" (read: non-God-knowing pro-social actors) conceptualise the world, themselves, and others. The beliefs he ascribes to this cardboard cut-out of "secular man" are painted with a judgmental hand. I do hope that the author does not mean to insist, with this piece, that we partake of his beliefs instead – simply based on his assertion that his beliefs alone (contra a belief in evolution, for example) are the correct ones, and because the alternative is to live as the spiritually and morally bereft figure he paints – but I do sense from his prose that he is twitching to say this. His self-restraint from outright proselytizing to his audience is commendable, but still he proceeds as far as to suggest that we may not wish to build a society "where altruists will be", but rather, only a society featuring people with "Christian love." His brazen claims against secular beliefs, such as that replacing God with "society" as the source of moral guidance necessarily leads to an "unstable and variable" moral system and the destruction of human dignity, are immodest assertions that will offend the morally upright non-believers in the crowd and that can be explained, though this will not be to the author's liking, as an attempt at dominating those he does not understand rather than disciplining himself to love them.

Real Love

Proceeding from the author's resonant claim that economists have not yet offered a reason for the existence of seemingly selfless behaviour, someone wishing to fill this gap might turn not to theology but to the features of humans (whether evolved, created, or otherwise) that are conspicuously absent from modern economic thinking. Evolution need not come into it, at least in the first instance. What then does social science know about humans that economics does not like to see?

For one, from psychology and neuroscience we know that there is such a thing as an unconscious mind, something that we cannot directly control but that feeds us information

(whether via dreams, or via thoughts or urges that we become aware of only after they arise outside of our conscious control). Also from these sciences plus simple introspection, we know that humans have a capacity for abstract thought and a rich imagination that we use in myriad ways, including to form a sense of personal identity, to create visions of the future, and to sustain intangible bonds to others and to ideas. From political science we know that humans are debilitatingly affected by power, a substance that to our species is an aphrodisiac. We also know that humans are innately a social species, despite the protestations of defenders of Homo Economicus, and suffer when deprived of regular interactions with other humans.

These are all elements of humanity that are simply not taught in introductory economics courses. If they are taught at all in the economics curricula of highly ranked universities, they are introduced only in forms deemed acceptable to modern mainstream economic science, typically via shoehorning into utility functions and preference maps.

Can innovative playing with these “known unknowns” – as an alternative to the author’s appeal to Christian teachings and dogma, and free of both reliance on evolutionary theory and the ball-and-chain of the discipline’s modern techno-scientific customs – point the economist towards where real love comes from, and what it is? Over the years my co-authors and I have tried to show that the answer is if not “yes”, then at least “maybe”. In Frijters and Foster (2013) we propose a theory of love with both explanatory and predictive power, heavily based on the observations listed above about power and the unconscious mind and on observations of humanity and its loves across time and across cultures. We term our theory “the love principle,” and write it in prose rather than in mathematical form. The essential proposal is that the love response becomes possible when our unconscious mind perceives an outside power that we cannot control but is capable of satisfying some core need of ours. As an example, our author (like many believers worldwide) loves his god, whom he perceives as very powerful, outside of his direct control, and able to satisfy many of his core needs. Non-believers experience love responses too, but in response to other external powers, such as other people, or abstract ideas like “my country” or “science.”

In Foster et al. (2019), my co-authors and I show how the dynamics of love in a relationship can be explained by a reduced but tractable mathematical form of this “love principle.” In Frijters and Foster (2017), we show how the imaginative mind of a person may simultaneously support a variety of loves, including for the concept of oneself, that motivate her feelings and behaviour. Admittedly we do not explain how the capacity for love arises within a human being, and I expect that future research will further explore whether this capacity is hard-wired, as claimed by Adam Smith and other philosophers, or to some extent programmed in childhood (and if the latter, how that programming works). A detailed origin story of love could be highly useful in guiding policy choices about investments in children. However, a framework for predicting the circumstances in which the love response, and hence pro-social or altruistic behaviour, is likely to be switched on or extinguished is already a step forward from where mainstream economics presently languishes in its conception of love. Neither God nor evolution needed.

As economists, my co-authors and I do not expect humans to be able to sustain any behaviour over the long term that does not provide some type of personal reward, and this includes apparently unselfish behaviour. The form of this reward may be a “warm glow” of enjoying someone else’s happiness, or simply feeling good about oneself for doing a “good thing”

(a feeling like what the author experiences, presumably, when he observes himself adhering to his god's commandments). The fact that apparently unselfish behaviour may have some positive return to the one exhibiting it is not, to the eye of an economist, something shameful or impure. Indeed, mainstream economics does not acknowledge shame or purity at all, a liberating feature of the discipline that reflects its professed stance of unconditional acceptance of humanity's true nature. The positive personal return to engaging in apparently unselfish behaviour is not something shameful, but rather a robust and happiness-providing mechanism for ensuring the perpetuation of that apparently unselfish behaviour. What is bad about that?

By contrast, one might be forgiven for interpreting the author's statements to imply that only saints can experience "true love." I would counter that he then requires the most powerful abstract force in the world (love) to be sustained in a species that receives no direct reward from it. How can that possibly be? What loving god would create a world with such suffering, where billions of individuals love their hearts out every day and receive no good feelings in return, being thereby inevitably depleted by the effort? To me that sounds, if not like hell on earth, then at least too draining to be sustainable. The author may counter that a relationship with God can provide the rejuvenation required to sustain this continued effort. Yet why then not entertain a simpler solution, in which an act of love provides its own reward, thereby removing the need for a separate source of rejuvenation?

The answer may lie in the author's own internal psychology. As indicated earlier, several signals in the author's prose indicate that in spite of his claim that Christianity's version of love does not divide people into "us" versus "them", he does not himself actually love non-believers but rather wishes to dominate them. He also seems to see his relationship with God as distinct from, rather than embedded within, his relationship with other humans (and particularly non-believers). In addition to his frustration with non-believers' refusal to share his beliefs, perhaps our author does not experience them to be as powerful or as capable of providing things he needs – requirements for the development of love, according to the "love principle" – than he would if he had no relationship with God, in part because his needs are already so mightily satisfied for him in his mind by God.

It is surely a joyful experience for the author to experience God's unconditional love and bask in its bounty. Yet this can be seen as a selfish pursuit to the extent that negative consequences for his relationships with real humans – such as a reduction in his capacity for true love for other people, and particularly for non-believers – are part of his devotional sacrifice. As a scientist, he therefore may be unable to entertain the possibility that the power of human relationships can offer the sustenance that non-believers (and many believers as well) receive from them, thereby blinding him to the possibility that real love can exist apart from God.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, the author offers value in his direct admission of massive holes that the discipline of economics regularly attempts to cover up. He reviews most of the highly cited contributions by economists exploring altruism and pro-social behaviour, and by calling out their inability to explain love, he emphasises the need for the discipline to do far more in this area in order to progress theoretically. He also states plainly for all to see that ideology drives much of

scientific investigation, again a refreshing admission of something obvious yet frequently papered-over. For all of this, the author deserves our thanks.

Yet our author makes no more progress than other economists in his pondering of love. He merely asserts that love is the exclusive province of the faithful and cannot be understood through scientific means (including appeals to evolution), implying that we should stop seeking to understand it and instead simply accept and bask in what has been God-given. He thereby offers yet another closed door in the face of social scientists wishing deeply to understand love. In pointing to his God as the sole source of love, the author fails just like countless economists before him to provide an empirically justified, testable, and tweakable theoretical model of the love process that can be used as a starting point of the rejuvenation that economics so desperately needs if it is to live up to its calling of seeing humans as they really are.

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