ALTRUISM: A SOCIAL SCIENCE CHAMELEON

by Colin Grant

Abstract. The self-interest paradigm that has dominated and defined social science is being questioned today in all the social sciences. Frontline research is represented by C. Daniel Batson's experiments, which claim to present empirical evidence of altruism. Impressive though this is against the background of the self-interest paradigm, its ultimate significance might be to illustrate the inadequacy of social science to deal with a transcendent reality like altruism.

Keywords: altruism; C. Daniel Batson; self-interest; social science.

Throughout the modern era, the self-interest assumption, which sees human beings as characterized essentially, if not exclusively, by self-interest, has come to be taken for granted as conventional wisdom that is too obvious to be noticed, much less questioned. At least this has been the case until relatively recently. Over the past couple of decades, the obviousness of the self-interest dogma has been questioned from several quarters where it had tended to be all but totally presupposed. In each of the social sciences, rebels have emerged, suggesting that humanity may not be as uniformly and thoroughly characterized by self-interest as had been assumed. In addition to self-interest, there would seem to be indications of genuine altruism which resists transposition into selfishness, except through machinations prompted by the self-interest dogma itself. In fact, in light of this recent simultaneous questioning from several quarters, it is difficult to determine which is the more surprising phenomenon, the tenacity and thoroughness of the grip that the self-interest perspective has had on modern consciousness or the variety and extent of the questioning to which it has rather suddenly been subjected. However, consideration of one of the most impressive exhibits of the recent interest in altruism, C. Daniel Batson's experiments purporting to provide empirical evidence of the existence of

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altruism, suggests that the promise that this evidence offers must be tempered by the possibility that social science is inherently incapable of containing the reality of altruism.

The Social Science Bias against Altruism

The ubiquity of the self-interest assumption in social science makes it difficult to document. Perhaps the most direct documentation of its predominance is to be found in summations offered in surveys, such as the conclusion that "the dominant modern psychological theories of motivation are fundamentally egoistic and hedonistic" (Sears and Funk 1990, 148). Or more broadly stated, "Whether one spoke to a biologist, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a sociologist, an economist, or a political scientist the answer was the same: Anything that *appears* to be motivated by a concern for someone else's needs will, under closer scrutiny, prove to have ulterior motives" (Piliavin and Charng 1990, 28; see also Hoffman 1981, 124f.). The prevailing assumption in social science especially has been that humanity is characterized fundamentally by self-interest, and this is so deep and powerful that it leaves no room at all for anything approaching genuine interest in, or concern for, the welfare of others, except insofar as that interest and concern is calculated to be beneficial to ourselves. Anything that looks like altruistic behavior is seen as a cloak for more primitive and determinative selfish motivation.

The predominance of the egoistic perspective in psychology is evident in the basic orientations that have characterized that discipline from its inception. The recently favored behaviorist approach sees human beings as stimulus-response mechanisms, open to the egoistic appeals of social engineers. The result is a division of humanity into manipulators and manipulated, and while the manipulators will probably cloak themselves in the kinds of goals that are reflective of noble aspirations, the manipulative nature of their methods implies an even more egoistic characterization of them than of their unwitting subjects. The more humanistic approach associated with Freud's clinically oriented psychoanalysis is even more blatant in its egoistic orientation than its behavioral successor. The vision and goal behind the psychoanalytic perspective is that of freeing the ego from undue restrictions imposed by the biological promptings of the id and the social constraints of the superego. The assumption is that humanity is composed of essentially egocentric individuals whose ego development is distorted by their hereditary legacies and environmental impositions.

Common sense might suggest that while such an individualistic outlook is understandable in psychology, it will not find accommodation in sociology. Careful consideration of dominant trends in sociology, however, suggests otherwise. Prominent approaches, such as the conflict the-

ory identified most readily with Karl Marx and the exchange theory promoted by George C. Homans and Peter F. Blau (see Warshay 1975, 38ff.), reflect a direct assumption of an egocentric view of humanity. Here sociology represents an expanded version of this vision in terms of the collective interests of classes and other kinds of interest groups. Not only individuals but their associations as well are characterized by a fundamentally acquisitive drive to possess and control. Organization theory, pioneered by Max Weber and developed by people like Frederick Taylor and Herbert Simon, clearly reflects this same vision of human nature. "Frederick W. Taylor, the founder of 'scientific management,' accepts the set of psychological requirements of the market system as tantamount to human nature," suggests Alberto Guerreiro Ramos, as part of his much wider thesis that "modern social science was construed for the purpose of liberating the market from the fetters which throughout mankind's history up until the rise of the commercial and industrial revolution, kept it within definite confines" (1981, 81, 22f.). The image of humanity that is assumed in this social science liberation is that of the rational calculator, approaching life from the vantage point of cost-benefit analysis. That outlook even impinges on the more holistic approaches to sociology, such as George H. Mead's symbolic interactionism. Reference to *the other* in Mead's notion of *the generalized other* turns out to involve capacities of the self to incorporate others, individually and collectively (Sykes 1980, 171f.), and so once again raises the spectre of a fundamentally egocentric outlook.

As pervasive as the self-interest assumption is in psychology and sociology, it is totally pivotal in political science and economics. The long-standing equation of politics with self-interest became explicit in the attempt to be truly scientific about politics around the middle of this century. *Rational choice* or *public choice* modeling of political positions gave clear expression to the self-interest assumption by the 1970s (Mansbridge 1990c, 10). So deeply does this assumption run that political scientists are even prepared to sacrifice rationality to preserve the egoistic characterization of humanity. Behavior that does not fit the self-interest model is dismissed as irrational. Thus Dennis Mueller proposes that "we retain the egoistic portion of rational egoism, and drop or, better, modify the rational assumption, at least in the strong form in which this assumption is usually employed" (1986, 5). The significance of self-interest for economics is too obvious to require comment, since it is there that the equation of self-interest with rationality was originally effected on a broad scale.

The triumph of self-interest is often attributed to Adam Smith and what turned out to be his program for free market economics. "Prior to Smith, self-interest was often identified with vice, and benevolence with virtue" (Donaldson 1982, 62). Although Smith did not effect a

straightforward reversal of these pairings, the net result was not far from this. Whereas self-interest had been highly suspect in previous eras, especially throughout Christendom, it acquired an air of neutrality as descriptive of the fundamental state of human nature, if not an actually positive connotation indicative of seriousness, industry, and reliability. The full development of this reversal was left to Smith's successors, although the role of Smith and his contemporaries was crucial in the transition. From the other side, Smith's approach was not entirely without precedent. Smith's free market economics had its antecedents in the political vision of Thomas Hobbes, whereby life is naturally "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (1939, chap. 13, 161), because one is instinctively out for oneself. This instinctive aggression and acquisitiveness are checked only by a social contract whereby we relinquish some of our natural independence to a sovereign in exchange for the protection of that great leviathan, the state. John Locke's democratization of the social contract provided an inspiration for the American Constitution, with the result that it is difficult to know which is the more significant factor in the shaping of America and the world it has pioneered, the economic version of self-interest articulated by Adam Smith or the political version drafted by Locke. Together they provided a formidable framework for fashioning the modern era.

The foundational role that the self-interest assumption has played in the formation of our world obscures the radical nature of the transition involved in its triumph. From an indicator of vice—the seven deadly sins being variations on selfishness—self-interest takes on this neutral, even positive, connotation. Such a dramatic reversal demands explanation. It is hardly credible that people like Hobbes and Locke and Smith suddenly decided that bad was good. If that is the import of the shift that they signal, there must have been reasons for reconsidering what makes for good and bad.

One crucial factor that separates the modern era from previous periods is precisely the fact of self-consciousness. Where even the more reflective segments of humanity tended to go about their business with little self-awareness prior to the modern era, the Cartesian ego signaled the setting of the self on center stage with a profile that could not be ignored. When to this we add the consideration of the impetus toward individualism instigated by the Renaissance and the Reformation and consolidated by the Enlightenment, there can be no doubt that the challenge of self-awareness was in the air in the early stages of the modern era. It is perhaps not a huge leap from incipient self-awareness to the assumption that the self is the center of life, whether life is approached in economic or political terms, or indeed in terms of political economy, which was the

original organic form that gave rise to the later separate disciplines of political science and economics, or still later, in more explicitly self-conscious social terms, to the emergence of sociology and psychology.

Self-consciousness thus constitutes a necessary condition for the emergence of the assumption of self-interest as the defining characteristic of humanity, but it is hardly a sufficient one. Some more definite motivation is demanded to account for the depth of this reversal. Albert Hirshman finds this more precise motivation in what he characterizes as a reaction of interests against the passions, particularly the passions for glory and honor (1977). Although self-interest was fundamentally suspect before the modern period, and in retrospect we might be surprised at the favor it found from the early stages of the modern era, in early modernity it may well have appeared to be a promising alternative to the enthusiasms of political, military, and ecclesiastical establishments. The pursuit of glory and vindication of honor through endless bloody battles represented the reality of the supposedly virtuous civil and ecclesiastical aristocracy. Richard Hooker, in *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1:192, I, X, 6, in Holmes 1990, 284), depicted the official thinking at the end of the sixteenth century, representing the common people as motivated by self-interest and civil and ecclesiastical leaders as devoted to the common good and motivated by love of virtue. Hirshman sees the elevation of self-interest toward the status of virtue as a reaction against the hypocrisy of this aristocratic vision. Demeaning though it might be, self-interest held the promise of a less vicious and violent means of arbitrating differences than the clashes and wars launched in the name of virtue. The result, as Hirshman sees it (1986), was that self-interest became established as the human paradigm through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through a curious process of expansion and contraction in meaning. The originally broad sense whereby self-interest was equated with rational behavior as such gave way to an identification with commercial interests in particular, but at the same time the notion of self-interest was taken to typify human motivation. In this way, commercial ambition was legitimized as a variation of the general basic direction of motivation, and at the same time this was reinforced by contrasting the innocuousness of self-interest with the more obviously destructive passions. That this ambiguity between self-interest as one of several possible motivations and self-interest as the essence of human motivation was not only tolerated but was generally unnoticed gives evidence of how much self-interest was endorsed and also helps explain how it came to exercise such influence.

In addition to the reaction against the dangerous aristocratic passions, the legitimization of self-interest received institutional support from the blossoming of democracy and the development of the market economy.

Mansbridge points out (1990c, 6) that the endorsement of self-interest coincided with the acceptance of conflict in political life as evidenced by the shift in the British Parliament from decision by consensus to the expedient of the majority vote. The mutual reinforcement of theory and practice is perhaps even stronger in the economic realm, where the success of the market system rendered the self-interest rationale all but impregnable. Thus, egalitarian developments in politics and economics represent the positive institutionalization of the revolutionary motivations identified by Hirshman.

One other factor neglected by Hirshman and most other social historians is the significance of the religious context (Holmes 1990, 276). The transformation of a concept that epitomized vice into the pivotal characterization of humanity and its prospects has vast moral, if not theological, implications. At the very least, it would seem to reflect a massive shift from a theological to a secular perspective. Any sense of ultimate allegiance is disowned in the name of the rights of individuals to determine their own lives. It can certainly be argued that this was the net result of this inversion, but that rationale can hardly be attributed to most of the major players at the time when the basic transition was effected. Smith himself was a moral philosopher, and Hobbes and Locke are by no means lacking in theological profession, unorthodox though it may be. In general, the initial endorsement of self-interest in the early modern era, far from representing a rejection of morality, is probably much more accurately understood as itself constituting a moral project. It is not accidental that people like Smith and David Hume are involved at the heart of the transition. One possible explanation for their recourse to self-interest is that they had accepted the somber picture of the human condition that had been promoted particularly through the Protestant emphasis on the sinfulness of humanity in such concepts as total depravity and original sin; but whereas theologians took this as indicative of the need for divine grace to deliver sinful humanity from its fallen condition, the moralist champions of self-interest saw this reading of the situation as a challenge to individuals to take responsibility for their own lives. For contrary to the assumptions congenial to the contemporary secular horizon, the religious context represented a significant dimension for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers, even if they were reacting against it. Self-interest offered a calculative way of dealing with sinners realistically and constructively. Whatever the direct significance of this factor may be in conjunction with the others mentioned, it is surely striking that through the assumption of self-interest, the one Christian doctrine that has been endorsed by modern secular culture in general and by the social sciences in particular is the doctrine of original sin.

Other factors no doubt play a part in the enthronement of self-interest as the virtually unquestioned dogma of modernity, but pursuit of these factors diminishes in importance in light of the questioning to which the dogma itself has been subjected of late. "In the last ten years, at the same time that economists were advancing rational choice models based on self-interest to explain phenomena as varied as industry regulation, marital stability, and suicide, social science disciplines other than political science were preparing the theoretical and empirical ground for a massive revision both of the larger adversary paradigm and of the rational choice standard within it" (Mansbridge 1990c, 16). And while psychologists study *prosocial behavior* and sociologists turn their attention to *helping behavior* such as blood and organ donation and aid to those in distress, economists and political scientists also have begun to question the adequacy of the rational choice standard and its basis in the self-interest assumption. In 1978, David Collard published *Altruism and the Economy*, suggesting that self-interest is not a sufficient basis for accounting for human motivation even in the economic sphere. At the end of the last decade, Roger Friedland and Alexander Robertson presented a more recent example of a challenge to the self-interest assumption from within economics itself in their *Beyond the Marketplace: Rethinking Economy and Society* (1989). Examples could be multiplied, but in the interests of economy, it should suffice to cite the conclusion of a 1990 survey of the social sciences by two social scientists. "In all these areas we are now seeing a 'paradigm shift'" (Piliavin and Charng 1990, 28). The direction of the shift is indicated by their title: *Altruism: A Review of Recent Theory and Research*. In all of the social sciences, even in the fields of economics and politics, where it received its initial endorsement and instantiation, the self-interest assumption has been called into question, and the need to consider that people are also to some extent motivated by something approaching genuine altruism has come to be entertained and explored with increasing seriousness.

The Social Science Discovery of Altruism

Without detracting from the basic direction of this summation of the situation, I must acknowledge that the hegemony of the self-interest assumption was neither as total, nor the emergence of interest in altruism as completely novel, as this depiction would suggest. Although the self-interest assumption figured prominently in the development of modern self-understanding, popularly and academically, "there was never any blanket endorsement of the idea" (Holmes 1990, 285). The original exponents of self-interest were not inclined to give it the absolute endorsement accorded by some of the later, more ardent rational-choice social scientists. Adam Smith, for instance, subordinated the

pursuit of self-interest to the requirements of justice. And even amid the most enthusiastic acceptance of the assumption, there were moments and individuals that foreshadowed the more extensive challenges that have developed of late. In his 1956 survey of what he called "a forgotten aspect of social thought," in his article "Altruism arrives in America," Louis J. Budd noted a particular burst of interest in this subject in the 1890s and a subsequent eclipse of interest until the decade in which he was writing, when it began to receive scientific attention as a dimension of human behavior that merited study. The extent of that attention is indicated by the fact that between 1962 and 1982 more than one thousand empirical studies of altruism were reported (Dovidio, 1984). However, these studies tended to focus on the social contexts in which helping behavior occurs more than on the reality of altruism itself, so that in 1970, Dennis Krebs was complaining that in spite of the research on altruism "the concept . . . is still unclear and no way has been found to measure its motivational base" (1970, 297). By the middle of the decade, he was still lamenting: "psychologists have manipulated antecedents of helping behavior and studied their effects, and they have measured a number of correlates of pro-social events; however, they have done little to examine the extent to which the acts that they investigated were oriented to the welfare of either the person who was helped or the helper" (1975, 1134). This pivotal failure to focus on the distinguishing characteristic of altruism—its orientation in terms of the welfare of the other—was addressed throughout the 1980s in a series of experiments directed by C. Daniel Batson.[1]

Batson and his colleagues were determined to establish whether or not there was such a thing as altruism—concern for the other prompted by the perceived needs of the other—which was not reducible to any ulterior motive attributable to the self-interest of the putative altruist. Not only did their experiments appear to provide empirical evidence for a genuine altruistic focus but this result was confirmed in further experiments designed to meet counterexplanations proposed by self-interest-oriented skeptics. In fact, this experimental pursuit of altruism could be thought of as the ABC's of altruism, since Batson's experiments respond to challenges from advocates of the established self-interest perspective, R. L. Archer and R. B. Cialdini. And as we shall see, we even move into the D's, with an interesting mediating role being played by J. F. Dovidio.

The central experiment is one reported by Batson and his colleagues in 1981.[2] The obvious way to determine whether persons are acting out of concern for others or are simply pursuing their own self-interest is to put them in a situation where they have an opportunity to help someone else. If the situation is set up so that it is easy for some to escape without helping and more difficult for others to get away, this will indicate how far

helping is simply the easiest way for someone to get out of a situation. If those who can escape easily without helping tend to do so, and if more of those in the more difficult escape condition actually offer help, this is an indication that helping can be regarded as an act of least resistance.

This result would tend to confirm pessimistic expectations regarding altruism, but this is an indirect inference. The difficulty is that motivation defies direct detection. How can one determine whether a person is acting out of altruism or self-interest? The Batson researchers were able to establish experimental evidence of altruism by finding a way to identify altruism at the level of behavior, where it can be detected, rather than at the level of motivation, where it is elusive. The basis for this behavioral test was the hypothesis that altruism is a reflection of empathy. People can be expected to act altruistically, Batson hypothesized, to the extent that they feel empathy for others. This hypothesis was tested in an elaborate element of the experiment. The ease and difficulty of escape was supplemented by a means of dividing subjects into high- and low-empathy categories. This involved giving the subjects a placebo and telling half of them, those in the high-empathy condition, that it had the side effect of producing a feeling of uneasiness and distress; the other half, those in the low-empathy condition, were told that it had the side effect of producing a feeling of warmth and sensitivity. The assumption, which in fact was borne out by the results of the experiment, was that those who expected to feel distress due to the placebo would perceive their response to the person requiring help to be primarily one of empathy, and those who expected the placebo to produce empathic feelings would perceive their response to be primarily one of personal distress.

Dividing subjects in these two ways results in four different groups: easy escape/low empathy, difficult escape/low empathy, easy escape/high empathy, and difficult escape/high empathy. This is what is called a 2×2 design, since the two divisions in terms of escape and empathy combine to produce these four states among the subjects. If the self-interest hypothesis is right, we should expect only those in the high-empathy/difficult-escape condition to demonstrate any significant indication of altruistic behavior. However, the empathy-altruism hypothesis that Batson wishes to test would predict that there should be significant evidence of altruistic behavior in all but the low-empathy/easy-escape condition.

The experiment involved having subjects watch a young woman, Elaine, receive electric shocks, and being given the opportunity to take the remaining shocks in her place. Ease or difficulty of escape from this potentially altruistic situation was effected by varying the number of shocks subjects were told Elaine was to receive, with those in the easy-escape condition being told the series was short, and those in the difficult-escape

condition being told there were several more shocks to come. The division in terms of empathy was made by the deception of the placebo. Those told that the placebo induced contentment were expected to attribute any empathy to the placebo and to focus on their own feelings of distress on seeing Elaine receive the shocks, whereas those who were told that the placebo induced uneasiness were expected to attribute their feelings of distress at Elaine's plight to the placebo, and to focus on Elaine's plight itself. The results confirmed the one-versus-three interaction pattern predicted by the empathy-altruism hypothesis. Of the four sections, the only one where helping was low was in the easy-escape/low-empathy group. The high rate in the other three is what is expected from the perspective of the empathy-altruism hypothesis. The salient implication is drawn by the researchers themselves: "In the distress conditions, where motivation was assumed to be egoistic, the rate of helping was significantly lower under easy than under difficult escape. In the empathy conditions, where motivation was assumed to be at least in part altruistic, the rate of helping remained high, even when escape was easy" (Batson et al. 1981, 301).

This evidence not only confirms the empathy-altruism hypothesis—that there is such a thing as altruism, willingness to assist others motivated by empathy for them—but also contradicts the egoism thesis that such behavior is simply the less costly way for egoists to deal with distressing situations. According to the egoism thesis, helping should not have remained high when escape was easy for those in the empathy condition. However, Batson and his colleagues are characteristically cautious about proclaiming the demise of such a deep-rooted assumption as the egoistic one. "For now, the research to date convinces us of the legitimacy of *suggesting* [their italics] that empathic motivation for helping may be truly altruistic." The most they are willing to infer from their results in regard to the egoistic perspective is: "we are left far less confident than we were of reinterpretations of apparently altruistically motivated helping in terms of instrumental egoism" (1981, 302).

The *A* was added to Batson's *B* of altruism research when R. L. Archer challenged the empathy-altruism hypothesis by contending that the explanation for the apparently high incidence of altruism among the Batson subjects is that they were really responding to wider social evaluation. They did not want to let their self-interest show, and so they acted with the altruistic response that would win the approval of others. The source of this social pressure might have been as innocent and indirect as the fact that a researcher gave the subjects instructions. The specific instructions themselves might have been quite neutral, favoring neither self-interest nor altruism, but the fact that the researcher was in charge gave the subjects a sense of being watched.

The Batson researches addressed this challenge with two further experiments: one in which the element of social evaluation was explicitly excluded for the subjects and another with the 2×2 design, where high- and low-empathy conditions were combined with high and low exposure to social evaluation. The results indicated that high empathy led to more helping under both high and low social evaluation. With characteristic caution, the Batson team proposes that "it does seem appropriate to conclude that the present research casts serious doubt on the suggestion that empathy leads to increased helping because more empathically aroused individuals are more concerned about negative social evaluation for declining to help" (Fultz et al. 1986, 769).

The *C* of altruism research is represented by R. B. Cialdini and his associates, who suggested that the apparently altruistic behavior is to be accounted for by what they term a "negative state relief explanation" (Baumann, Cialdini, and Kenrick 1981). Supposed altruists are really motivated by concern to relieve their own sad or depressed mood rather than by empathic identification with the victim (Cialdini et al. 1987, 749–58). In stating their conclusions, they offer a somewhat backhanded compliment to the Batson work, summarizing the significance of their experiments as "providing a plausible egoistic explanation for the first powerful experimental evidence for pure altruism"[3] (Cialdini et al. 1987, 757).

The Batson researchers countered with a report of no less than five experiments designed to test the empathy-specific thesis advanced by Cialdini (Batson et al. 1988, 52–77). The most dramatic of these involved the 2×2 design, this time combining a distinction between whether or not the person in need of help received help with a distinction between allowing half the subjects to be the source of that help and half not to be. The assumption was that if subjects offer assistance out of concern for their own feelings of distress rather than out of genuine concern for the person in need of assistance, then those who have no opportunity to provide relief will show less elation over the fact that relief has been provided than those who have the opportunity to be the source of that relief themselves. However, the mood improvement for high-empathy subjects was high when relief was assured regardless of whether they were able to be source of that relief, confirming the empathy-altruism hypothesis that the real focus is the need of the victim and not the need for negative-state mood relief on the part of the subject. Batson and his colleagues are somewhat more daring in their summation of the results of these five studies, taken in conjunction with the results of the earlier studies: "the claim that the motivation to help evoked by empathy is directed toward the egoistic goal of avoiding empathy-specific punishments seems very doubtful. As with a claim for the existence of unicorns,

we cannot categorically say that it is wrong, but we have looked hard in a number of likely places to find supporting evidence and have found none." Yet in spite of consigning the counterevidence to the status of unicorn hunts, the Batson team continue to qualify their claims. "Still, at this point the possibility that a negative-state relief version of the empathy-specific reward hypothesis can account for the empathy-helping relation cannot be entirely ruled out" (Batson et al. 1988, 75).

Three further studies, aimed directly at Cialdini's negative-state relief hypothesis, further confirmed that high-empathy subjects score high rates of helping even when anticipated mood enhancement offered relief without helping (Batson et al. 1989, 922–33). But they still do not take this as disposing of the negative-state relief hypothesis or as complete vindication of the empathy-altruism hypothesis. Batson and his colleagues acknowledge the presence of negative-state relief among high-empathy subjects. Their own studies, as well as those of Cialdini et al. and others, confirm this. Their quarrel with Cialdini is over the contention that the egocentric motivation dispenses with any real altruistic motivation. Their own studies strongly suggest otherwise:

> Apparently, the empathy-helping relation is not simply the product of an egoistic desire for negative-state relief. There is more to it than that. Whether this "more" is the product of an altruistic desire to relieve the victim's distress, as the empathy-altruism hypothesis claims, remains to be seen. Certainly, our results are entirely consistent with that hypothesis. Moreover, plausible alternative explanations for the growing support for the empathy-altruism hypothesis are increasingly hard to find. (Batson et al. 1989, 932)

Thus, Batson and his various colleagues have addressed the challenges to their empirical identification of altruistic motivation with experiments that have consistently supported the empathy-altruism hypothesis and have rendered the alternatives problematic. They can even claim converts from the other side. "Our work, from an independent laboratory and conducted by researchers who have typically adopted the egoistic perspective (see Dovidio 1984), replicated the findings of the critical tests used by Batson and his colleagues (see Batson and Coke 1981)." (Schroeder et al. 1988, 352). In a book summing up his own experiments and exploring the historical and philosophical background as well as speculating about the overall significance of *The Altruism Question*, Batson concludes that, contrary to the sense of altruism as an unnatural chore, typified by Kantian morally autonomous individuals facing a constraining duty, the truth may be almost the exact opposite, that we are characterized by a natural inclination to care about other people. Still, this conclusion is proposed with characteristic caution. "Admittedly, this answer is still tentative, but the evidence does seem strong enough that we should start looking for the party hats" (Batson 1991, 230).

The Social Science Problematic of Altruism

Whether we look for the party hats will depend on how impressive we take the evidence to be. Even Batson's critics recognize that his discovery could have dramatic repercussions. "The implications for fundamental characterizations of human nature are considerable" (Cialdini et al. 1987, 749). In a culture based on the self-interest assumption, empirical evidence of the presence of an altruistic strain is no small matter. Some see this evidence as not only potentially revolutionary but also incontrovertible. "This is publicly verifiable; the conditions of falsifiability are explicit. No one can wriggle off the hook" (Rigby and O'Grady 1989, 733). But there are elements that suggest that the hook is not as firmly embedded as such enthusiasm would suggest. For one thing, there is an element of artificiality about these kinds of laboratory experiments with people. The technique for classifying empathy, for instance, through administering a placebo and planting suggestions designed to divert people so that they focus on the dimension opposite to that which the placebo supposedly promotes, although apparently effective, does not deal with the reality of firsthand empathy in the subjects themselves, as critics of Batson have pointed out. Beyond these kinds of reservations about elements in the experiments, however, there is a more pervasive source of concern, namely, that the difficulty is perhaps not so much the quality of the evidence as the evidence criterion itself.

Evidence of an altruistic strain in humanity is not just another piece of scientific information, if there is such a thing, not least because it is information about ourselves and our relations with others. If the altruism is real, it can be expected to have significance for our living. In fact, if it is believed to be real, it can be expected to have significance. This is Batson's view. "If it turns out that we are capable of altruism," he suggests, "then our moral horizon—and our potential for moral responsibility—broadens considerably" (1991, 4). But this means that far from being a matter of empirical revision of our understanding of human nature, the altruism studies involve a vision of human potential. Not only what we are but what we might become, as individuals and as a society, is at stake. "If our belief in universal egoism is wrong and we are actually capable of altruism, then possibilities arise for the development of more caring individuals, and a more compassionate, humane society" (1991, 4). Here we are dealing not only with empirical information but also with moral transformation. How this transformation is to be achieved is the decisive question.

Batson does not naively anticipate any direct transformation. He recognizes two crucial limitations on altruism in the evidence he and his coworkers have uncovered. The support for the empathy-altruism hypothesis suggests that altruism tends to be commensurate with the

range of empathy and that in practice the range may be quite restricted. The other crucial factor is the competing concerns that emerge as the cost of helping increases. The higher the cost, the more considerations of self-interest are likely to arise (Batson 1990, 344f.). These limitations might suggest that the evidence for altruism is not so significant after all. But this is where the question about the nature of evidence arises. For these limitations might be due in part to the acceptance of the self-interest paradigm. If that paradigm were displaced by the recognition and expectation of altruism, those limitations might change. Erosion of the self-interest paradigm might have the effect of encouraging altruism. As Jane Mansbridge puts it, from the opposite direction: "because thinking that another has acted unselfishly often leads people to behave unselfishly themselves, underestimating the frequency of altruism can itself undermine unselfish behavior" (1990b, 141). Thus, if we were to come to expect altruistic concern more than we do under the self-interest paradigm, the range of our empathy might be increased and the time at which we began to calculate our own interests might be deferred somewhat.

Clearly, what is at stake is something different from the conventional understanding of empirical evidence. Revision of our understanding of human nature turns out to be a challenge as much as a description. However, if this seems disappointing from the perspective of scientific expectation, we must realize that it places the prevailing self-interest reading of human nature in the same position. That reading is not simply a description of the way human beings are but also functions somewhat as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is presumably why Batson believes that recognizing the reality of altruism challenges not only our basic view of human nature but the fundamental approaches of social science as well. "If we are capable of altruism, then virtually all of our current ideas about individual psychology, social relations, economics and politics are in an important respect wrong" (1991, 3). The reality of altruism challenges the factuality of the self-interest paradigm in two senses: in terms of its accuracy and in terms of its adequacy. One claim is that it is simply inaccurate. Human beings are characterized by altruism as well as by self-interest. But what we have been considering here is a wider sense in which this whole way of representing human beings is basically inadequate. Human beings react to descriptions, so there is no such thing as a neutral description of human nature. Putative descriptions are at the same time invitations for individuals to confirm them by their actions. Consequently the accuracy of any proposed description depends on how far human beings adopt it as well as on how far it reflects any present reality. Any depiction of human beings that does not take this into account is inadequate. What we are now beginning to see is the possibil-

ity that if the self-interest paradigm for depicting human beings is inadequate, then this ideal of depiction is itself inadequate, at least as far as human beings are concerned. This is tantamount to questioning the adequacy of the social sciences as they have been fashioned in terms of the self-interest paradigm. It is not only facts about human nature that are questionable; the fundamental fact-value dichotomy is itself at stake.

In one sense, social science can deal with altruism very easily. What could be more natural for any social perspective than a view of social relatedness? From this point of view, it should not come as any surprise that this is precisely the background against which the concept of altruism originated. The notion is generally traced to the widely acknowledged founder of sociology, Auguste Comte, who is credited with coining the term *altruism* for his depiction of the cohesion of humanity that he expected to emerge in the positive era, when the distractions and deflections of theology and militarism were left behind. "In a word, Biocracy and Sociocracy will be alike pervaded by Altruism; whereas during the long period of theology and military training egoism predominated." Indeed, for Comte, "the greatest problem of life [was achieving] the ascendancy of altruism over egoism" (Comte 1875, 1:500; 2:146). It is at least ironic that a discipline founded to champion altruism should have come to be so dominated by the self-interest paradigm. It is apt to appear totally contradictory until we notice that the background against which the notion of altruism is advanced is one of self-interest and egoism. Nor is this simply the egoism attributed to ecclesiastical and military ambition. The point is that in seeking to displace these egoisms, Comte invoked an even more ambitious one through his own positivistic prescriptions. The ideal of total control that distinguished the positivism Comte advocated is precisely the corollary of the self-interested understanding of human beings. The ideal of the self-interested individual is to be in complete control. Thus, in devising the notion of altruism in the context of his advocacy of positivism, Comte was subordinating altruism to self-interest right from the start. There is no particular irony, then, in the loss of interest in altruism in social science. It would be ironic, however, if the self-interest basis of this origin of the concept were neglected in the renewed interest in altruism today, although this neglect is almost inevitable precisely because of the entrenched significance of the self-interest paradigm as definitive and directive for social science. The depth of that paradigm may well prevent recognition of the fact that it too is ultimately the sponsor of the social science concept of altruism.

The real significance of the failure to consider the self-interest context behind the notion of altruism is not in the neglect itself but in the very concentration on altruism that it permits. The irony of this is evident in Batson's work. Batson discovered altruism by strictly concentrating on

the focus on the other as its distinguishing characteristic. He is totally uncompromising in this insistence. "As soon as benefit to the other becomes an instrumental rather than an ultimate goal, the altruistic motivation evaporates. Only egoistic motivation remains" (1991, 224). There can be no question that this is a courageous stand in the present climate, even allowing for the growing dissatisfaction with the self-interest paradigm. Whether it constitutes an adequate basis for portraying what altruism involves, however, is another question.

The dominant impression conveyed by uncontestable instances of altruism is of spontaneity and naturalness. Not only did rescuers of Jews in Nazi Germany not set out to be heroes; they did not seem to see their activities in terms of explicit goals at all, instrumental or ultimate. They tended to see themselves as ordinary people doing what the situation demanded (Oliner and Oliner 1988; Monroe, Barton, and Klingemann 1990). In such a serious matter as kidney donation, even though the recipient was a close relative, it is surely significant that "a majority of kidney donors decided instantaneously to give this gift" (Simmons 1991, 15). This lack of deliberateness and calculation suggests that understanding altruism in terms of a direct focus on the other may be as unsatisfactory as the self-referential concern altruism is taken to preclude, and may even be a subtle version of the latter.

Genuine altruism seems to be characterized by paradox of the kind intimated in the famous remark of Henry David Thoreau: "If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life" (1962, 160). Thoreau feared being the object of a meddling do-gooder precisely because of the "conscious design" that would render him an object for that person's purposes. Thoreau's lesson may be that the direct focus on the other that Batson takes to be the distinguishing feature of altruism renders altruism instrumental just as surely as any assistance afforded to another with an ulterior, self-interested motive. The focus on the other that is the literal meaning of altruism makes sense only in connection with the self-focus from which it derives. Serious altruism, whether of the caliber of rescuers in Nazi Europe or of commuters giving a stranger directions while their own bus comes and goes, seems to be characterized by an involvement that is as oblivious to the otherness of the other as to the interests of the self.

What we may be approaching is the conclusion that, as a social science concept, altruism is inadequate to the reality it seeks to identify because it remains within the orbit of the self-interest control that has defined social science. Far from being a subject susceptible to delineation in any such direct terms, the reality designated by the term *altruism* seems to have more in common with the elusiveness of happiness,

with what has been called "the paradox of hedonism" (Singer 1979, 217). Like happiness, altruism seems to defy direct pursuit or appropriation. Just as happiness happens as a by-product of satisfying involvement, so altruism is a response that is evoked much more than constructed. This does not mean that the direct evidence of altruism that Batson provides is not important. It could be a significant factor influencing the climate of expectation, so that the obviousness of self-interest is challenged and more scope is given for altruistic directions. For this scope to be actualized and further expanded, however, would seem to depend on experiences of self-transcendence in which the self-other distinction is blurred rather than accentuated. To focus on the other directly is likely to be even more counterproductive than the attempt to grasp happiness. From the outside, the vantage point adopted by social science, altruism occurs when a self, which is by definition self-interested, shows evidence of active concern for another. But if that perspective is adopted by the altruist, the altruism evaporates. "The effort to identify with another cannot authorize and may as psychological praxis even obstruct saintly work" (Wyschogrod 1990, 85). It seems that real-life altruism just does not work as a self-conscious, deliberate activity. This suggests that impersonal social science treatments of altruism are intrinsically incapable of dealing with the living reality of saintly altruism.

The naïveté and immediacy of saintly altruism further suggests that the ultimate obstacle is not the psychological inadequacy of the social science approach to altruism. Batson has been criticized for failing to appreciate "humanistic-spiritual psychology" (Thrasher 1991, 163), but if the interpretation we have been following here is at all credible, the problem is not the kind of psychology assumed but the kind of assumptions inherent in the ambitions of psychology as such. The objective of domination and control is the antithesis of the self-transcendence that characterizes serious altruism, and the difference is not simply psychological. Beyond the psychological short-circuiting of altruism that deliberate attempts at altruistic activity are likely to encounter, the more serious problem emerges when such attempts are thought to succeed. This is where the paradox of altruism becomes most acute, because altruism's ultimate parallel is not the paradox of hedonism, but the paradox of righteousness. For altruism has a connotation of merit that happiness does not necessarily have. The paradox of righteousness is that the more righteousness is thought to be achieved, the more likely it is to degenerate into self-righteousness. As Hannah Arendt observes: "Goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author" (1958, 24). She might have said, "especially by its author." This is why the focus on the other that defines

social science altruism is apt to be destructive of saintly altruism rather than to promote it.

Evidence of altruism in a culture dominated by the promotion of self-interest provides reason to look for party hats. It is heartening to find assurance that we are not as selfish, or even as self-interested, as we have been led to believe. However, before the music gets too loud for us to hear one another, we would do well to reflect on just how distinctive a deliberate focus on altruism really is. This might well represent a variation on the self-interest vision, as in the origins of the concept in Comte's positivistic perspective. The evidence of real-life altruism suggests that the genuine article is devoid of precisely this note of deliberateness and calculation. Ultimately the issue posed by the rediscovery of altruism might be as far-reaching as that of the adequacy of the social science displacement of theology. Although real-life altruists may not attest to any particular religious motivation themselves, the reality of saintly altruism suggests a freedom from self that typifies the intent and promise of religions at their best. Disillusionment with the self-interest paradigm that has increasingly dominated modern society may result in an equally dangerous era of self-congratulatory pseudo-altruism, unless we are prepared to consider the limitations of the manipulative, control-oriented approach that would render altruism essentially a variation on our self-interest. To do this would involve entertaining the possibility that the point of life lies beyond ourselves, collectively as well as individually, beyond the modern theological surrogate that we call society. Full-bodied altruism may well entail a transcendence of self that is of religious proportions. Thus, while we can take heart that social scientists are questioning the sole sufficiency of the self-interest paradigm and even finding evidence of the presence of altruism, there will be real cause for celebration when we can say with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "too much altruism is a bore" (1953, 96).

NOTES

1. Although the Batson experiments are particularly striking, they are by no means isolated. Another reconsideration of the self-interest assumption, from a different angle, consideration of the importance of community and communication for decisions about contributions to group interests, is represented by Caporael et al. (1989). This article includes an extensive reaction in the form of an Open Peer Commentary. Kohn (1990) offers a very readable but extensively documented survey of social science reconsideration of the self-interest assumption.

2. The central Batson experiments are described in Batson et al. 1981; Batson et al. 1983; Fultz et al. 1986; Batson et al. 1988; Batson et al. 1989. Batson sums up these experiments, with convenient tables outlining the methods and results of each, in Batson 1990. A fuller exposition, supplemented by consideration of the historical and philosophical background as well as speculation about the present implications and future prospects for altruism, is provided in Batson 1991.

3. The work they praise is exemplified by the publications by Batson and his colleagues that are cited in the References of this article.

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