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The 'Me First' Model in the Social Sciences Is Too Narrow

THE NEOCLASSICAL VIEW predominating in both the social sciences and the public realm is that people always pursue their own self-interest. Although there is some truth in the concept, it is too narrow to explain or predict human behavior adequately. To change the concept, however, we must do more than criticize it—you cannot beat a theory (or a social philosophy) with nothing. We need to build a new, broader foundation for the social sciences, a process that is now advancing in one of the typical ways that concepts evolve.

The "me first" model is being not so much replaced as absorbed by the "I&we" model. The new model grows out of the old model's assumptions about the goals people pursue, the ways they pursue them, and the characterization of the decision-maker (is he or she a solitary person or part of a community?)

The neoclassical model assumes that people all have one overarching goal: to satisfy their own wants. Historically, those wants were depicted as materialistic. More recently, they have come to include satisfaction derived from altruistic acts, but the basic motivation remains self-centered and hedonistic. According to the neoclassical paradigm, however seemingly selfless the goal, people are always motivated by their own interests in pursuing it. Research in this tradition further assumes that a person's tastes can be neatly ordered into one unitary pattern of desire—a notion at the heart of economics.

The I&we model, on the other hand, assumes that people have a dual nature—that while they have self-serving desires, they do not pursue them mindlessly. Instead, one's "judging self" examines one's desires and evaluates them according to several criteria, the most important of which are moral and social values. A struggle then ensues. Under some conditions, desire wins out; under others, values triumph.

The significance of incorporating a moral dimension into our concept of human nature is that a sense of morality is what separates human beings from animals. Our moral commitment and our desires do not often pull us in the same direction, and much of human life can be explained in terms of the struggle between the two forces and the conditions under which one or the other prevails.

Once the conflict has been resolved and a goal chosen, how does one decide on the means to achieve it? Rationally, neoclassicists say—that is, by using empirical evidence and logical inference. But a very persuasive literature exists arguing that people do not make choices on rational grounds.

What we need is a new model of decision-making that will tell us how people do decide, rather than that they often do not do so rationally.

The idea that most people's choices are influenced heavily by their values and emotions provides a beginning. Entire categories of means to ends, whether efficient or not, are judged to be unacceptable and are automatically ruled out. For example, about a third of the people entitled to welfare benefits refuse to apply on the ground that "it's not right." While emotions and values are often depicted as distorting rationality (which they do), they also influence people against using means that may be efficient in the narrow sense but are wrong or hurtful to others. That is, our values influence both our choice of goals and the way we proceed to accomplish them.

The neoclassical model also draws on and contributes to the idea that all moral rights are invested in the individual, who is assumed to be the legitimate decision-maker. Attempts to modify the person's tastes are viewed as inappropriate interventions. For example,

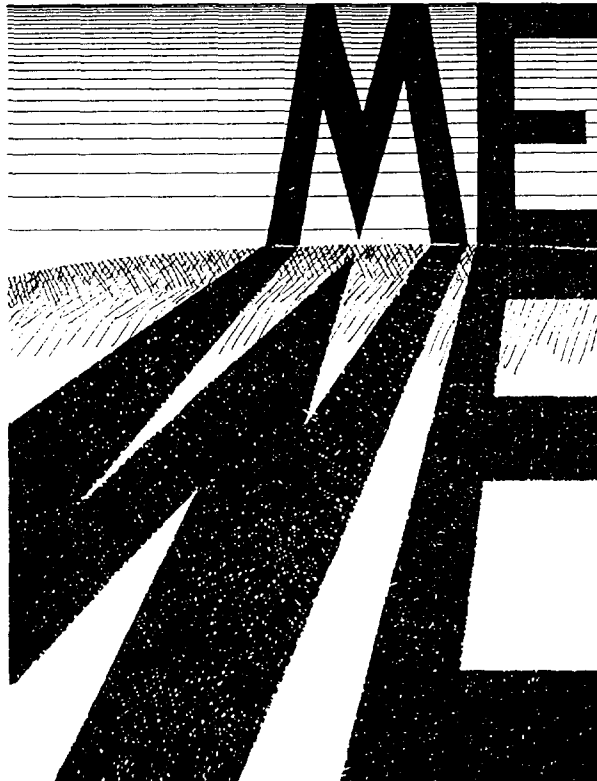


ILLUSTRATION FOR THE CHRONICLE BY MAX-KARL WINKLER

most government actions aimed at redirecting the individual are looked upon as coercive. In contemporary terms, neoclassicists are essentially libertarian.

The more recent philosophical conception of individuals and communities as interdependent attempts to correct radical individualism. It holds that the community has a moral status and rights of its own. While some of its proponents go so far as to neglect individual rights entirely in the name of "the motherland" or some other such cause, a more defensible position is to recognize that both individual rights and duties to the community have the same basic moral standing. For example, the I&we model recognizes both the individual's right to benefit from the savings of past generations and the obligation to save for future ones; or the individual's right to trial by a jury of peers and the individual's obligation to serve on a jury.

The voice of the community is typically moral, educational, and persuasive—not coercive. If coercion must be relied upon, it indicates that the community has been weakened, that too many of its members are engaging in activities previously considered to be unthinkable. A more effective policy than enhancing government would be to rebuild the social and moral values of the community. That shift starts with a change from the neoclassical model to one that encompasses, rather than ignores, the concept of community; that balances, not replaces, individualistic tendencies with concern for others; and that extends beyond material incentives to the role of values, particularly shared values, as long as they are freely endorsed and not imposed.

The I&we model has implications in a number of areas. For example:

■ **Research.** It is productive, for explanatory and predictive purposes, to take into account both individual desires and moral commitments when studying human economic behavior. For instance, to understand compliance or non-compliance with tax laws, we need to know how high the tax rates are (a neoclassical factor) and the extent to which people consider the tax

system fair or unfair. To understand why people conserve energy, we need information about changes in oil prices and about whether people believe that conservation will help their country or the environment.

■ **Public policy.** Take the question of saving versus consumption, for example. Economists recommend various policies to encourage saving and reduce consumption—curtailing federal expenditures (a major source of consumption) or taxing consumption. Both policies have a cost. The first may cause a recession, which exacts huge human and economic costs; the second is regressive and imposes an unfairly heavy burden on the poor. The fact that policies have costs does not mean that they are necessarily undesirable. It does, however, point to the merit of considering other perspectives. A fuller policy would emphasize the accumulation of debt as socially undesirable behavior, behavior that undermines our collective well-being and threatens our future—the way debt was perceived until the 1950's. To bring about the change, the President, community leaders, and educators would all have a role in trying to change people's long-range perspective. Such a program would cost relatively little, is not regressive, and draws on people's values rather than imposing a solution.

■ **Education.** Through textbooks, neoclassicists teach millions of high-school and college students every year a model that, as the economist Robert Solow puts it, "underplays the significance of ethical judgments both in its approach to policy and [in] its account of individual and organizational behavior." Neoclassical textbooks are replete with such statements as, "[T]he rational thing to do is to try to gain as much value as I can while giving up as little value as I can." They discuss the Bible and dope as two interchangeable consumer goods, and view both children and cars as "durable consumer goods." One wonders about the effect on the attitudes of potential parents toward children, if they are taught systematically to think of their offspring as a trade-off for other "goods," such as cars.

STUDIES of the educational effects of neoclassical teaching show that students become more self-oriented, just as they may become more rational in their decisions. A study of "free-ride" experiments conducted by Gerald Marwell and Ruth Ames showed that in 11 out of 12 experimental runs, most participants did not free ride and contributed from 40 to 60 per cent of their resources to a group collection. However, a group of graduate students in economics contributed only an average of 20 per cent.

All societies set aside certain areas as "sacred." When people are taught to think about them in cost-benefit terms, those areas are "secularized" and stripped of their moral standing, ultimately causing them to be treated as neoclassicists say they are. For example, creating a market for "rights" (such as selling permits to pollute) undermines taboos against this anti-social behavior by normalizing it.

We need to do more than document the role of moral and social values. We also need to include those factors in our teaching and public philosophy. By doing so, we will strengthen individuals who are committed to the community and encourage the development of public policies that are caring and decent.

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