
Sidney Waldman, a professor of political science at Haverford College, holds that the poor state of equality of opportunity (particularly as indicated by a public education system that to a large extent continues to neglect those worst off), and the reckless foreign policy that has undermined America's global standing command a reexamination of American democracy. The underlying cause of these and other damaging features of the American society, according to Waldman, is that the American people have too much self-love (defined as "a concern with themselves and their families that forgets or ignores the fates of others" [p. 58]) and not enough compassion. We recognize these failures of our society, both domestic and global, but allow them to go untreated, above all because we "cannot put ourselves in the shoes of certain others" (p. 98, emphasis in original).

Waldman recognizes that leaders can have a transformational effect on the public, acknowledges the role of the media, and points to defects in the political system itself, especially regarding campaign finance law. However, he insists that the fundamental source of America's shortcomings is to be found in the character of the American people. "In sum," Waldman writes, "our political system cannot be much better than we are" (p. 60, emphasis in original).

Waldman calls for a resurgence of morality and/or religion to restore the public's compassion, not to eliminate self-love but to counterbalance it with a sense of the other's pain. Political science, he argues, should follow the same course; Waldman chastises the relativistic turn taken by political scientists and urges a return to a more values-oriented approach in the discipline. More specifically, he argues for the reintroduction of the now-unfashionable concept of the "public interest" to provide a normative orientation to academic political work that has lost its moral compass.

One cannot but feel an urge to support someone who stands up against self-centered behavior and extols the public interest. From my viewpoint, anyone who takes on the champion of self-love, Adam Smith (author of The Wealth of Nations and of The Theory of Moral Sentiments) is on the side of the angels. Nor is it surprising that Waldman, like many others who have gone down this road, is much clearer about what is wrong as compared to what ought to be done. However, one cannot but wish that the book were a bit less preachy and quite a bit more analytical.

Most pro-social behavior is driven not by a single motive but by complex combinations of motives. Nurses, teachers, scientists in the lab, reporters on the beat, parents, and most others work in part to serve their own self-interest, in part because they enjoy serving others or a cause, and in part because whatever deprivations and indignities their work entails, it provides a public service or otherwise does good. Most behavior is neither egotistical nor altruistic, but pro-social.
True, in various periods, the mix of motives changes. And to some extent, this mix can be affected. However, the most effective way to proceed is not to try to increase altruism but to modify what people do to serve themselves. For example, if we need more nurses, we ought to pay them more and show more respect for their work. There is room for changes in values and moral commitments, but those are difficult to engineer. Here a study of what Al Gore, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Bono have been doing recently—how they proceeded, what worked and what did not, and how lasting the effects of their work have been—would be of much interest. This is not the route Waldman chose to follow.

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