

Altruism will save us, not the market economy



BY DAVID BROOKS
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Western society is built on the assumption that people are fundamentally selfish. Machiavelli and Hobbes gave us influential philosophies built on human selfishness. Sigmund Freud gave us a psychology of selfishness. Children, he wrote, "are completely egoistic; they feel their needs intensely and strive ruthlessly to satisfy them."

Classical economics adopts a model that says people are primarily driven by self-interest. Political science assumes that people are driven to maximize their power.

But this worldview is clearly wrong. In real life, the push of selfishness is matched by the pull of empathy and altruism. This is not Hallmark card sentimentalism but scientific fact: As babies our neural connections are built by love and care. We have evolved to be really good at cooperation and empathy. We are strongly motivated to teach and help others.

As Matthieu Ricard notes in his rigorous book "Altruism," if an 18-



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We need more of the kind of altruism Erika McNew and more than 150 other fellow Charlotte Realtors showed in volunteering to clean overgrown yards.

month-old sees a man drop a clothespin she will move to pick it up and hand it back to him within 5 seconds, about the same amount of time it takes an adult to offer assistance.

When we build academic disciplines and social institutions upon suppositions of selfishness we're missing the motivations that drive people much of the time.

Worse, if you expect people to be selfish, you can actually crush their tendency to be good.

Samuel Bowles provides a slew of examples in his book "The Moral Economy." For example, six day care centers in Haifa, Israel, imposed a fine on parents who were late in picking up their kids at the end of the day. The share of parents who arrived late

doubled. Before the fine, picking up their kids on time was an act of being considerate to the teachers. But after the fine, showing up to pick up their kids became an economic transaction. They felt less compunction to be kind.

To simplify, there are two lenses people can use to see any situation: the economic lens or the moral lens.

When you introduce a financial incentive you prompt people to see their situation through an economic lens. Instead of following their natural bias toward reciprocity, service and cooperation, you encourage people to do a selfish cost-benefit calculation. They begin to ask, "What's in this for me?"

By evoking an economic motivation, you often get worse outcomes. Imagine what would happen to a marriage if both people went in saying, "I want to get more out of this than I put in." The prospects of such a marriage would not be good.

In 1776, Adam Smith defined capitalism as a machine that takes private self-interest and organizes it to produce general prosperity. A few years later America's founders created a democracy structured to take private factional competition and, through checks and balances, turn it into deliberative democracy. Both rely on a low but steady view of human nature and try to turn private vice into public virtue.

But back then, there were plenty of institutions that promoted the moral lens to balance the economic lens: churches, guilds, community organizations, military service and honor codes.

Since then, the institutions that arouse the moral lens have withered while the institutions that manipulate incentives — the market and the state — have expanded. Now economic, utilitarian thinking has become the normal way we see the world. We've wound up with a society that is less cooperative, less trusting, less effective and less lovely.

Maybe it's time to upend classical economics and political science. Maybe it's time to build institutions that harness people's natural longing to do good.