THE PRINCIPLE OF RECIPROCITY

Development of Prosocial Behavior in Children

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Although what is really right-and-good in one cultural context may not be right-and-good in another, the cornerstone of all moral systems is the principle of reciprocity. Reciprocity is represented in Christian religion by the "Golden Rule," and in Eastern religion by *Karma*—the sum of the ethical consequences of one's past and present actions. The moral principle of reciprocity recognizes, in the social order, the underlying structure of relations described by Piaget, in the natural order, as reversibility. The moral norm of reciprocity both acknowledges and places a positive value upon the fact that the elements of social reality are reciprocally determined; that is, interdependent in lawful ways. To the extent that my understanding of self-interest does not include my obligations toward society-at-large, my actions will be asocial or antisocial in the short run, and self-defeating in the long run, i.e., I shall reap what I have sown, or the effects of my efforts will be cancelled by those I have offended.

Universalists, such as Kant, differentiate between prudence or self-interest, and morality; while Marxist rule-utilitarians, such as myself, do not. As Marx puts it, man, as he matures, becomes able to understand his history as a process and to conceive of nature—including practical control over it—as his real body: Physical nature constitutes man's inorganic flesh and the social environment his organic flesh. To be reconciled to our own social nature, we must coordinate our social with our sensuous nature, our immediate with our long-range objectives, and our personal with our general interest. With this understanding, the distinction between pragmatic and moral considerations, based as it is on the reification of the self/other dichotomy, is transcended. For Marx, as for Hegel and John Stuart Mill, pragmatic considerations are essential ingredients of moral judgements, real-life social knowledge, and ethical conduct.

The superordinate principle of reciprocity acknowledges the "pattern of exchange through which the mutual dependence of people, brought about by the division of labor, is realized."[1] Reciprocity refers to the balance in an interactive system such that each party has both rights and duties, while the subordinate norm of complementarity states that one's rights are the other's obligations. An imbalance in a social system is introduced either by giving more than is received or by the converse, producing a tension to redress the imbalance. The common good is benefited neither by unmitigated agency nor by unmitigated altruism. Unmitigated (i.e., nonreciprocal) altruism, as practiced by self-effacing individuals or in a welfare society is in effect noncontingent positive reinforcement which produces learned helplessness rather than self-sufficiency in its recipient as well as a tension to redress the imbalance by the equivalent of a "taxpayers' revolt." Conversely, without the counteracting force of the interest of the common good, the force of self-interest (including self-actualization) operates unchecked. It is therefore no more moral to be self-effacing than to be overly self-protective. In a functionally equilibrated society, a reciprocal rather than inverse relationship exists between self-interest and the common good such that neither negates the other. In such a society, reciprocal altruism constitutes normative behavior. A principled understanding of the superordinate norm of reciprocity is not necessary for an individual to behave as a socially responsible citizen. The naive form of reciprocal altruism, i.e., you should help others so that they will help you, or so that others will think well of you and reward you, provides a sufficiently

reliable and valid motive for doing good and avoiding doing harm.

The principle of reciprocity requires mutuality of gratification and governs relationships within all stable social systems, including the family. Thus children, as they mature, are expected to give something of value in exchange for what they receive. The subordinate norm of complementarity states that one's rights are the other's obligations. Thus, if children really do have a right to be nurtured and not merely to seek nurturance, then there must be those caretaking adults with a complementary obligation to nurture. Children in turn incur obligations reciprocal to that right, such as returning love and complying with parental directives, which enable their caretakers to nurture satisfactorily. The privileges, responsibilities, and rewards of parents and their children reflect their contrasting competencies and social roles and therefore are complementary rather than identical.

Spokesmen of the liberation faction of the children's rights movement, such as Farson[2] and Holt,[3] espouse a radical individualism which subverts the moral principle of reciprocity and deters internalization, by children, of the norm of social responsibility. Farson and Holt negate the principle of reciprocity by arguing that children are entitled both to beneficence, by virtue of their dependence, and to self-determination, by virtue of their status as autonomous persons. The ethical thrust of the liberation wing of the children's rights movement would increase what Farson terms the "unbelievably burdensome" duties of parents, thus negating the redemptive process by which individuals, recognizing that there are debts incurred in being nurtured, seek to repay their debts rather than increase them. The child repays these debts to his caretakers by loving and obeying them and to societal institutions by respecting their conventions. The adult repays them by becoming a productive, self-reliant member of the community. This redemptive facet of the principle of reciprocity is manifest in the norm, easily generalized, which dictates that those whom you have helped have an obligation to help you, and that you are obliged to help those who help you.

Subordinate to the principle of reciprocity are three ethical strategies thought to jointly govern ethical conduct in Western society: beneficence, justice, and respect for persons. The first ethical strategy, *beneficence*, requires the provision of positive benefits and the avoidance of harm, thereby permitting a unilateral provision of resources for those whose dependent status

precludes return in kind. In the social system of the family, parental benevolence both models altruistic behavior and justifies parental authority, while parental exploitation models selfish behavior, undermines parental authority, and impairs children's conservation of trust in interpersonal relations.

The second ethical strategy, *justice*, requires a fair distribution of burdens and benefits such that rights and obligations are properly balanced and mutual gratification is obtained. Parental sovereignty is traditionally authorized by the dependent status of children and by the fiduciary obligations parents incur toward their children as a consequence of this status. Because children are truly inferior in competence to their parents, parents are obliged to give more in the way of resources to their dependent children than their children are expected to return to them. No injustice is incurred when these children are reciprocally subjected to the sovereign rule of their parents. This reciprocal relationship between the rights and obligations of parent and child constitutes, in fact, the basis of Rousseau's social contract, which he defined as follows:

> The most ancient of all societies, and the only one that is natural, is the family: and even so the children remain attached to the father only as long as they need him for their preservation. As soon as this need ceases, the natural bond is dissolved. The children, released from the obedience they owed to the father, and the father, released from the care he owed his children, return equally to independence.[4]

Basing its moral claim primarily on a simplistic view of the third ethical strategy, *respect for persons*, the children's rights movement equate justice with unilateral respect by parents for a misinformed image of what kind of persons children really are. If the principle of respect for persons requires honoring the choices of autonomous individuals, we must then ask how individuals whose status defines them as dependent can also be regarded as autonomous? If respect for persons signifies respect for what they truly are, then respect for children requires that their dependent and immature status be recognized as intrinsic to that definition, and moreover, that their rights and responsibilities be determined by their actual nature as children.

The child advocate concerned primarily with extending children's rights sabotages the legitimate efforts of the child advocate concerned primarily with children's welfare. The effort of one is necessarily contradicted by that of the other. To the extent that

children are perceived as dependent, political action can be directed toward mandating services that children *qua* children need. Conversely, to the extent that children are accorded the autonomy of independent persons, they do not merit the favored status accorded dependents.

Child liberators naively suggest that the child has the unqualified "right to do, in general, what any adult may legally do."[5] Arguing that children should have exactly the same rights as adults, Farson and Holt in fact demand for children rights that not even adults possess, including those which depend for their exercise upon competencies which children do not possess, e.g., the right to freely travel, to make economic decisions, and to select alternative home environments. The effect of the Farson-Holt position, were it adopted, would be to give additional freedom to children by usurping that of their adult caretakers. If, for example, children are accorded the right to alternative living arrangements, then parents are involuntarily deprived of the parent-child relationship they have fostered and, in addition, are held responsible for the costs of implementing that alternative. These children's rights advocates show little understanding of how prosocial behavior or self-determination develop in children.

The capacity for self-determination develops in children in conjunction with their capacity for prosocial behavior. Childhood is a dynamic state in which the child matures towards adolescence and the adolescent towards adulthood. Self-reliant, prosocial behavior has both motivational and performance components, each of which develops with age. Because infants and very young children are so necessarily dependent upon others that they cannot be viewed as having autonomy, to speak of according self-determination to them is meaningless. Children at the preoperational stage of development can coordinate their behavior with that of others only to the extent that the role required by the situation is familiar to the child. They must otherwise turn to an older person to prescribe the appropriate response(s) or assimilate the unfamiliar situation into a pre-existing context in play. Within the context of a social matrix, self-determination requires complementarity of role performance and anticipation of the reactions of others concerning one's role performance. Thus, self-determination assumes the ability to select one among known alternatives, all of whose consequences are also known and embraced. It is precisely this ability to make choices knowledgeably and to assume responsibility for their consequences that the dependent child lacks.

True environmental mastery and a stable sense of self develop through the equilibration process, motivated in part by parental demands for accommodation. The inequalities in power between child and adult result not from adult oppression and exploitation nor from children's original nature, demonic or angelic, but rather from developmental laws of nature which are inherently irrevocable. These stage-related differences in competent performance and in the comprehension of natural and social laws justify both the entitlement of the young child to nurturance and succor and the entitlement of parents to obedience and respect.

The short-range objective of exercised adult sovereignty is the maintenance of order in the family. This short-range objective is subordinated to the long-range objective of producing a self-reliant young person from the dependent child, however. At each childhood stage the duties and the rights of parents and children differ, ultimately approximating the balance which characterizes the adult-adult relationship. During the period that the child is dependent upon them, parents have a social and moral obligation to commit themselves to the welfare of the child, and the child a complementary duty to conform to parental standards. During the adolescent stage the child gradually relinquishes the privileges and dependence of childhood, assumes the responsibilities and autonomy of adulthood, and is rewarded with self-determination. By experiencing contingent reinforcement and a balance of rights and responsibilities finely tuned to his progressive stage of development, the child achieves an increasingly differentiated understanding of the norm of reciprocity.

Moral stages represent successive forms of reciprocity in which the capacity for treating the other as someone like oneself rather than alien from oneself develops. Empathy is a primitive response in which an individual experiences vicariously the suffering of another, or projects upon another his own pain. Even very young children will respond vicariously to signs of distress from another. Compassion is a more developed response, presupposing the ability to make a prior differentiation between self and others such that the needs of others can be accurately assessed and responded to even when they differ from one's own. At higher moral-cognitive levels, the self-other differentiation is overcome and the individual is intentionally bound by the principle of reciprocity: Role-taking and the coordination of the perspective of the self with that of the other becomes a stable moral enterprise rather than a primitive empathic response or a mere instrumental tactic.

The earliest form of reciprocity is that of reciprocity between obedience to adult authority and freedom from punishment. In that first stage, which Piaget terms *moral realism*, adult-made laws are reified as though they were absolute laws. Second-stage reciprocity consists of the literal exchange of rewards or punishment, with the goodness or badness of the act separated somewhat from the nature of the reinforcing consequences. During the preschool years, adult constraint expressed as consistent contingent reinforcement and regularity helps promote security and the belief that the world can be a safe, predictable place. Consequently, the probability that the child will repeat either prosocial or antisocial acts is determined to a very large extent by the reinforcing responses of their recipient or socializing agent. Because the preschooler's social-conventional reasoning is limited, the use of inductive disciplinary techniques that involve love-withdrawal or complex explanations confuses the child and facilitates neither compliance nor prosocial behavior. Used by a loving parent, power assertive techniques do. Because of their almost total dependency, children at this stage are entitled to unconditional commitment from adult caretakers—not to the absence of adult constraint.

By Kohlberg's Stage 3,[6] the child has a more comprehensive cognitive basis for prosocial behavior. The child recognizes, for example, that stable social relations, including those within the family, are based upon reciprocal maintenance of expectations by social partners as well as upon appropriate feelings of gratitude or malevolence. Children who have reached the age of reason and the stage of concrete operations are well aware that others have perspectives differing from their own. They actively solicit approval from adults as well as peers, and can understand the reasons for parental directives. Perceiving their peers as like themselves in status and nature, they can extend towards them genuine concern and comprehend their antithetical position in an altercation. Childbearing practices focused on the principle of reciprocal altruism as it operates concretely in the child's own life will foster in the school-age child the ability to make inferences about how others feel, as well as provide a model of role-taking. At this developmental stage, the assignment of responsibility encourages internalization of the norm of reciprocal altruism, effecting both the encouragement of prosocial behavior and the reinforcement of the child's internal locus of control and sense of personal agency.[7]

By Kohlberg's Stage 4, the prepubescent or early adolescent child has a developed notion of social order in which social approval and respect are earned by work, and in which keeping one's word is understood to be mandated by the social contract. These children are typically more preoccupied with doing well in school and being liked than with the issue of personal freedom. Prior to adolescence, there is no evidence that children's capacity for self-determined prosocial behavior is enhanced by childbearing practices which focus on autonomy at the expense of disciplined conformity with legitimate adult requests. In fact, the entire thrust of my longitudinal program of research suggests the converse: preadolescent children require firm parental discipline as well as care and protection to become responsible personal agents.[8]

In my sample of predominantly well-educated, middle-class children, girls are markedly more socially responsible than boys at all ages, whereas boys tend to be more physically active and aggressive. Variations in parents' socialization practices are more predictive of boys' than girls' friendly, cooperative (socially responsible) behavior, and of girls' than boys' socially assertive behavior. Parents' demandingness (i.e., firm control and high demands for maturity and participation in household chores) is more predictive of girls' social assertiveness than parents' responsiveness (i.e., warmth and encouragement of independence and individuality), whereas parents' responsiveness (particularly maternal warmth) is more predictive than their demandingness of boys' social responsibility. The most socially responsible children, however, come from homes where parents are both highly demanding and highly responsive (authoritative families) and from families in which mothers are highly responsive and fathers are highly demanding (traditional families). These two family patterns share in common two factors: high maternal responsiveness and high paternal demandingness. Authoritative parents treat the rights and duties of parents and young children as complementary rather than identical. They remain receptive to the child's views, but take responsibility for firmly guiding the child's actions. They see the child as maturing through stages with qualitatively different features, but do not describe this maturational process as an automatic unfolding. Instead, they emphasize the importance of well-timed parental interventions.

I will now consider the operation of the principle of reciprocity during adolescence. As Elkind points out, the egocentrism so prominent in early childhood peaks again during adolescence.[9] Adolescents typically presume the attendance of an imaginary audience that is as concerned with the uniqueness of their feelings and personality as they are. This personal fable justifies their sense of uniqueness and reinforces

their belief that they are deserving of special attention. As youths develop formal operations, they become aware of the mutability of social conventions and may appear to regress to a previous egoistic, unsocialized orientation. Liberated from the literal reality to which they were confined as children, but not yet constrained by adult commitment to work and love relations, adolescents are typically omnipotent in imagination and impotent in action. Newly awakened to the imperfection and hypocrisy of the adult world and to the freedom born of nonengagement and noncommitment, they may reject and criticize this world with self-righteous abandon.

Because early adolescents may adopt a pseudo-independent stance in order to compensate for still very strong feelings of helplessness, parents may mistakenly assume that their charges are as capable and desirous of substantial autonomy as they profess to be, and withdraw their own commitment and firm guidance. However, firm family structure and reassuring rituals of obedience to the authority of family and tradition continue to provide necessary support to the early adolescent. Low parental involvement, even more than parental harshness, is associated with negative outcomes and low self-esteem at this age. If accustomed parental control is withdrawn at this time of heightened stress, the adolescent may in distress turn to the peer group for support. If peer norms in turn support antisocial behavior, including the use of drugs and alcohol, the abandoned child may adopt the antisocial peer norms with serious consequences.

Where traditional values have not been displaced, adolescence tends to be a less turbulent period of development. Providing that firm parental control has been exercised in childhood, far fewer rules will be required in adolescence. If family power becomes more symmetrically distributed as the child matures, the adolescent will be prepared and eager to accept both increased responsibility and increased autonomy. Although a control attempt by one person toward another results in psychological forces both to comply and to resist at all ages, by adolescence the forces to resist become an important counterforce to compliance because they reflect a stage-appropriate drive toward independence.

Adults who herald the banner of children's rights are in effect justifying their failure to fulfill their

fiduciary obligations to their adolescent children. The abolition of status crimes has this effect. Thus, children are free to run away, but parents are not obliged to take them back. Child liberators would provide youths with a plethora of unreal options. Their interventions often neutralize the efforts of better-informed adults who would expose adolescents to the forces of social reciprocity by offering them genuine choices from among a few good options and requiring of them that they reciprocate for services received with something of value.

For the most part, the courts have been appropriately reluctant to enact legislation based upon exceptions to the rule that, in general, parents do act in their children's best interest. The courts have thus far taken care not to extend age-inappropriate constitutional rights to those too immature, developmentally, to exercise them. The extension of constitutional rights to children which do not violate the principle of reciprocity should be supported, but only those. If children are to be subject to harsher prison sentences, then a corresponding increase in legal procedural guarantees is morally required. Where parents' interests conflict with each others' or with their child's, as in custody suits or in warding a minor to the state or an institution, the child's desires and interests should indeed be heeded by child advocates.

The moral norm of reciprocity must be adhered to in family relations as they must be adhered to elsewhere. The inevitable result of upsetting the reciprocal balance between the rights and responsibilities of parents and those of children is that parents in increasing numbers do not feel morally bound to commit themselves unconditionally to the welfare of their dependent children. Violation of the norm of reciprocity within the family setting has resulted in children abandoned by parents who do not enjoy them. As for the adolescent progeny of the affluent, liberal parents who buy into the rhetoric of the children's rights movement, they, at least, will not contribute to the problem of overpopulation by reproducing their own kind. Emancipated from birth with all the privileges but none of the responsibilities of adulthood, these liberated children are hardly likely to exchange their privileged status for that of an oppressed parent. If they were to opt to bear children at all, they would most assuredly redress the imbalance created by their parents' permissive upbringing by demanding too much, not too little, from their own children.

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Footnotes

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