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On the Nature of Sharing: Beyond the Range of Methodological Individualism¹

DURAN BELL

School of Social Sciences, University of California,
Irvine, Calif. 92717, U.S.A. (dbell@uci.edu). 5 v 95

In spite of some avoidance and denial, anthropologists tend to be influenced by the developments and limitations of economic theory. This is in part because anthropology is preeminently an empirical field that has left these theoretical matters to others and in part because anthropological method has been adapted to the prevailing conceptual base of a culture of which economic theory is an endogenous component. This adaptation is explicitly recognized in the recent paper in this journal by Kristen Hawkes (CA 34:341-51), whose analysis of sharing among hunter-gatherers makes effective use of the notion of *public goods*, a concept with broad currency within economics. Hawkes is also an adherent of evolutionary ecology, a field that shares with economics an approach to theory building called *methodological individualism*.

The position of methodological individualism within the economist's tool kit was discussed by Kenneth Arrow in his Richard T. Eli Lecture before the American Economic Association in January 1994. Arrow asserts with no sign of discomfort that economists of today customarily evaluate the appropriateness of publications and academic promotion "under a criterion that in principle the behavior we explain and the policies we propose are explicable in terms of individuals, not of other

social categories" (Arrow 1994:1). His purpose was not to challenge this form of scholasticism but, on the contrary, to indicate that this narrowing of the economist's intellectual perspective is not inconsistent with a recognition of the social context of individual activity.

The situation is as follows: It is required by methodological individualism that the analysis of any process (economic, social, genetic) be analyzable as the outcome of the behavior of individuals, and this approach stands in opposition to the belief that "group properties cannot be reduced to those of its members and their interactions" (Smith and Winterhalder 1992:39). Nevertheless, as Arrow points out, there is a social domain that can be accommodated within this paradigm. Individuals may collectively ("socially"?) receive a flow of information from a given stimulus. In other words, they may constitute a *public*, in which each individual acts autonomously on the information thus received, using its own resources. For example, the set of potential customers for a product constitutes a public, as does a labor market, and the employees of a business are a subset of a public. And, of course, there are public goods.

However, Arrow should not be satisfied with the limited forms of collectivities allowable under methodological individualism. It cannot reckon with the ethnographic and widespread historical incidence of resource possession and management by *corporate* groups. By "corporate group" I mean a set of individuals who, on the basis of age, sex and parentage, have socially pre-scribed rights (of some kind) to a particular set of resources. Hence, a tribe or tribal segment, a nuclear family-household, and a nation-state are examples of corporate groups; the shareholders of IBM stock do not fit this description. In discussing domestic groups, for example, economists generally deny the existence of the kind of rights and responsibilities that characterize corporate groups. In some economic models, fathers support their children not because children have rights to the resources of their father, not because a father has socially recognized responsibilities to his children, but because of kindness (altruism)—as though the well-being of children were legitimately dependent on the ephemeral moods of a father.

In my view, the valuable insights of Hawkes relative to the importance of prestige in systems of sharing among hunter-gatherers are weakened by her failure to recognize corporate groups (as defined herein). An anonymous referee of this paper contested this point, suggesting that methodological individualism does recognize "corporate groups or collective ownership." However, collective ownership of, say, IBM stock is an attribute of a *public*—a set of atomized individuals who are free, as individuals, to act egocentrically. The conflation of corporate groups with collectivities of individuals is symptomatic of the weakness of methodological individualism, and it is Hawkes's adherence to this approach that induces her to rely on *publics* as the relevant domain of sharing, with the consequence that when individuals seek the effective realization of their rights or person as members of a hunting band they are rudely

¹ I have benefited from thoughtful readings of earlier drafts from a number of people, especially Richard D. Granis, William Fitzgerald, Douglas R. White, and two anonymous referees.

characterized as thieves. In fact, the hunter had no right to consume the kill, and he has an obligation to recognize the use-rights of others, but unfortunately, an understanding of these processes is beyond the range of methodological individualism.

Reciprocal Altruism

The driving presupposition of evolutionary ecology is that every individual acts in the interest of its own genetic reproduction. Hence, an individual can be expected to share resources with its own offspring and with genetic relatives only to the degree that they are genetically related to that individual (Hamilton 1964). Trivers (1971:6) extends Hamilton's analysis to relationships with nonkin by positing a process of delayed reciprocity whereby both parties obtain long-term gains; he calls this process *reciprocal altruism*:

Assume that the drowning man always drowns when his rescuer does and that he is always saved when the rescuer survives the rescue attempt. Also assume that the energy costs involved in rescuing are trivial compared to the survival probabilities. Were this an isolated event, it is clear that the rescuer should not bother to save the drowning man. But if the drowning man reciprocates at some future time, and if the survival chances are then exactly reversed, it will have been to the benefit of each participant to have risked his life for the other.

Trivers's discussion is essentially an analysis of exchange processes and of friendship relations. It is not a discussion of sharing. Nor does he claim otherwise. Hence, in extending Hamilton, he moves onto an entirely different plane of analysis. The reason for the difference is that Hamilton is discussing within-group actions of ego that promote the genes of ego, whereas Trivers is concerned with actions of ego that directly promote the genes of an outsider. It is only when the other person reciprocates and reciprocates with sufficiency that ego's reproductive success is advanced. In her discussion of sharing Hawkes mentions reciprocal altruism as a possible model of sharing and rejects it. The data on the !Kung and the Ache appear to indicate that many men fail to reciprocate—fail without obvious consequence, in violation of the presumptions of the Trivers model.

However, the story of the drowning man should have been a story about sharing, not about trading and reciprocity. Let us reconsider this man. Why should anyone risk a life to save him? Trivers says that a person will jump if and only if it can be expected that the person, so saved, will reciprocate. Surely, that would be a reason. But is that the reason? Absolutely not. The probability that B will have occasion to save the life of A after A has saved the life of B is typically in the neighborhood of zero. No rational atomistic individual will ever jump. After all, the drowning man can't even swim!

A person jumps in the water to save another because, as a socialized member of some form of corporate group,

he recognizes a *social responsibility* to support the rights of the other, including the other's right to life. In many societies it will be the responsibility of a kin group to maintain the lives of its members, and it will be their right to demand compensation or vengeance in the face of avoidable harm. In the United States, where kin groups have been subordinated, protection of life becomes the responsibility of the nation-state (a corporate group) and its citizens (the set of individuals with rights to its resources). This fact is revealed most explicitly in cases where there is a fairly well-defined obligation of the "bystander" to save an endangered individual. "If one owes to another a plain particular and personal duty, imposed either by law or by contract, an omission (a failure to act), resulting in the death of the party to whom such duty was owing, usually renders the delinquent party guilty of a homicide" [*Simkins v State*, 1990, Court of Special Appeals of Maryland). By legal standards these cases of "depraved indifference" are fairly "rare," only about 2,000 cases during the last decade, and in most cases the victim has been a child whose parent(s) bore the "plain particular and personal duty."

The significance of "depraved indifference" in the law is that there is no need to prove premeditation or intent in these cases in order to sustain a conviction of murder. Rather, it is sufficient that "his conduct, objectively viewed by a reasonable person, 'manifested a depraved indifference to the value of human life'" (*Maine v Dodd*, Maine Supreme Judicial Court, 1985). A finding of criminal culpability can also apply to cases in which persons are not related by socially enforced obligation, so long as there was some form of interaction between the parties that reinforced the duty of the defendant. We see this in a New York case in which two men robbed an other and left him in a state of blind drunkenness by the side of a road, where he was killed by a passing car. Theirs was a case of murder, as well as robbery, by "depraved indifference," even though they were not guilty of driving the car that hit him or of inducing the inebriation that made him vulnerable. They had failed to act in a manner that one may reasonably believe to be essential to preserving the life of another (*New York v Kibbe*, Supreme Court of New York, 1973). And there was a 1993 case of a "drowning man." In this case a mother was found guilty of "depraved indifference" for failing to help or to call for help when her epileptic son fell into the swimming pool and drowned (*New York v Beaudoin*, Supreme Court of New York, 1993).²

These examples are particularly relevant to our discussion, given the strongly individualistic ideology that has developed in the United States. If the models of evolutionary ecology apply anywhere, it should be here in the heartland of methodological individualism. These are court cases in which the defendant is charged with murder. They establish the fact that an individual has a right to life that others are obliged to recognize, and they

2. I am indebted to Richard D. Grannis for suggesting the relevance of "depraved indifference" to this discussion.

show clearly that a person's obligation to save another is in no way conditioned by the probability that he or she may someday require the same assistance from that party or from some other party. Rights are, in every case, an expression of socially supported norms and are not conditioned on potential "reciprocal" benefits that may subsequently accrue to the bearers of responsibility. Moreover, the establishment and significance of these rights cannot be expected to emerge in the context of the prisoner's-dilemma games so popular among evolutionary ecologists and economists, because those games accept methodological individualism as an underlying postulate.

TOLERATED THEFT

Since the Trivers model requires reciprocity, it is inconsistent with the existence of free riders. In order to deal with this kind of problem, Blurton Jones (1987) has suggested that sharing beyond the context of kin may be imposed upon the possessor of some desirable resource by his unwillingness to prevent the theft of that resource once he has consumed some of it. This doctrine of "tolerated theft" presupposes that those who are very hungry will act with greater determination and forcefulness with regard to acquiring a resource than the hunter whose immediate needs have been satisfied.

However, the data on hunter-gatherers suggest that *gathering* is more often the source of staple goods and that meat is a novelty (the Inuit being a prominent exception). When this is the case, hunters will seldom be met by a desperate mob, a point made quite effectively by Hawkes. Yet we find that people have the audacity to demand meat from hunters. On what basis do they do so? The answer is that experience has taught them that hunters distribute meat, or somehow it *gets distributed*, when they have it and it is demanded. There is a *socially supported expectation* that meat will be distributed, and this expectation constitutes a use-right to a share of the resource in question.

The data are convincing to the effect that use-rights to the product of subsistence gathering tend to be confined narrowly to the domestic group. These gathered goods are the primary staple, but they suffer low social valuation because everyone is capable of collecting them and because the returns to effort are predictable. And even if gathered foods were scarce, there would be no scarcity of human capacity for their acquisition. On the other hand, the mental and physical attributes of the effective hunter appear to be quite unevenly distributed among persons, favoring men over women, especially when the latter are encumbered with children, and favoring certain men over others. In this way hunting establishes a ranking of men among men.

The motivation for hunting arises from the fact that some people do not hunt or do not hunt successfully. It is strengthened by the existence of lesser men, some of whom may choose to become "free riders" rather than hunt unsuccessfully. Given his ignominy, the free rider

may as well enjoy the meat. The good hunter is recognized to be good because of such men.

For the hunter the provision of a collective resource provides prestige and generates a flow of personal benefits. That is, when there is a broadcast of information to the public relative to his reputation, he will be better able to gain benefits from individual members of that public. The dissemination of negatively valenced information has the contrary effect. Hence, a kind of social structure can be said to exist—a structure of prestige rankings among men. But this does not tell us that a hunter *should* distribute his meat. It is quite possible for the prestige achievable through sharing to be of less value than the advantages to be gained from gifts to specific others (by means of reciprocal altruism); it may be better to give meat in exchange for something else of value.

We have already shown that reciprocity appears not to be the model for describing the available data. But why should this be the case? Why does trade lose out in favor of sharing among hunter-gatherers?

First, in order that there be trade, the trader must have full rights of possession. Meat must become personal property. This is so because one cannot trade without having the right not to trade; the trader must be a residual claimant to the stock, offering it to others only to the extent that the expected reciprocal responses justify his offers. But for this to be true—for a man to have a right of private possession—there must be social supports for his claim. Rights are *socially supported* claims on resources. And in order that rights be held with security, others must be willing to fight for them—in this case, fight for a man's right to be selfish. This is not an absurd proposition, given that this is precisely the phenomenon that one finds in all hierarchical systems of private appropriation. The police, courts, and burgeoning prisons of the United States bear witness to this effort, as do the cruder efforts of the Haitian police and "attaches." In a comparable manner, the set of good hunters should be able to recruit a group of lackeys, paid in meat, to defend their rights of private possession. Moreover, such organized forces of social support should be apparent within hunter-gatherer societies if hunters do have such property rights. If hunters trade rather than share (as Hill and Kaplan [1993] argue), there must be a formal structure of thuggery by which the right to be selfish is protected.

However, if resources are privately appropriated, they will not be customarily shared. A person would be foolish to allow general distribution of resources that are his alone, given the investment in resource defense that has been necessary to the realization of his claim. His organized group of bully-boys exists precisely to deny any broader claims. If personally appropriated resources are distributed, it will be in the form of gifts. And if he behaves rationally, he will allocate meat selectively to others *of his* choice—choices dictated by the friendship relationships that he desires to cultivate. As discussed earlier, he will allocate his gifts in accordance with the

degree to which he expects reciprocal return gifts. A number of people will compete for his friendship (and meat) by offering him other goods and services. These return-gifts, including sexual access to specific women, may provide for him a considerable benefit. Indeed, it is not clear that exchanging meat (with specific others) for favors of various sorts is not his best option, even though by doing so he forfeits the positive public evaluations that may be associated with sharing. He may find himself hated by all except the chosen few whom he befriends but greatly (and sufficiently) benefited by the latter. For most individuals it is better to be one of the select friends of a good hunter than to be the friend of a hunter who has prestige from having provided meat to everyone indiscriminately. For the selected few, it is better to enjoy his meat than his reputation. If the hunter's objective is to gain *advantage relative to particular individuals*, his best option is to offer meat to those individuals in exchange for reciprocal offerings from them. He will have maximized his leverage in relation to these persons.

If, however, his objectives are more diffuse, general, and unpredictable, then he may be better off seeking an improved general reputation—a generalized advantage in social relations. He will be able to exploit his prestige with anyone who is in receipt of the relevant information about him, including people who *never* receive meat. The sharing of a collective good brings private benefits, as Hawkes has indicated, from members of the group and perhaps from outside as well. One may not be able to extract great favors from any one person, but there may be many more persons from whom something of value can be expected. Prestige is not as efficient as direct obligation, but it is flexible and, in that sense, *risk-reducing*. I would agree, then, with those (e.g., Smith 1993) who stress risk reduction in relation to sharing. Indeed, the possibility of an intertemporal smoothing in the flow of meat consumption may be the primary benefit of sharing in the context of extreme food uncertainty, as among reindeer hunters. A hunter may be unable to predict which of his fellows will prove to be effective in hunting or which of them is likely to remain with the group or leave it. The nonhunter of today (the apparent "free rider") may be the effective hunter of tomorrow. In this event, the flexibility of sharing may be attractive relative to the presumptive precommitments of exchange relations.

An overarching concern about meat may, however, not exist. The data do not support the assumption that food availability is a binding and overwhelming constraint on the behavior of hunters in many societies (Lee 1968, Sahlins 1972, Hawkes 1993), and we must allow other things to emerge as primary objectives of behavior. A man may also seek *advantages in an uncertain flow of interpersonal relations*. These benefits can induce a preference for general distributions within the group.

Studies indicate that male members of hunting societies expend considerable time and effort in the development and maintenance of complex systems of social rela-

tions—time and effort for which the sharing of meat can be complementary. But there is a problem: If the hunter distributes indiscriminately over a period of time, then he will have reinforced among others in the camp the expectation of receiving meat without the obligation to reciprocate and, consequently, to expect meat as a *right of person*—that is, as a right that is normatively incident upon a member of a given collectivity. It is precisely for this reason that we find "No trespassing" signs in locations where such trespass would cause no immediate inconvenience to the owner. It is a matter of common law: Once people are allowed to claim the meat of hunters (or some other resource) as common practice, a share of that meat (or resource) becomes a right of person for those who have enjoyed it. Once others have rightful claim to use a re-source, it is no longer the rightful possession of the original "owner." Hence, the meat belongs to the hunter only in the limited sense that he uniquely may gain prestige from its acquisition, but the consumption rights to the meat do not belong to him—those rights reside in the group. The hunter's refusal to distribute meat will therefore lead to violence against him by an assembled band. In attacking the hunter and seizing the kill they will not be committing theft, tolerated or otherwise. They will be claiming what is rightfully theirs. He is the thief, not they! This is the root meaning of the expression "Property is theft!" (Proudhon 1840). Only with the aid of his defending lackeys can he make a claim of private possession and accuse others of theft—denying to his fellows their rights of person. This indeed describes the actions of the British ruling classes in denying the rights of the common. People can be expected to attack the selfish hunter not because they are so hungry but because they are outraged by the injustice.

"Tolerated theft" is an idea that arises from the assumption that private possession is the natural status quo ante and that sharing arises from widespread violation of property rights. This is not the case. As we have just seen, sharing is the default option. Sharing is the expected form of allocation when no one has organized a coercive force against the mass of others in the face of an asymmetrically distributed resource. It is only by means of purposive coercive action that private rights can be created, and the creation of those rights have fundamental consequences for social structure.

The actual distribution of resources in a sharing regime can take many forms. Each of these forms can be said to be rational, in the sense that a reasonable explanation can be posited for the observed situation, but it is rationality quite different from that of private appropriation. Private appropriation is associated with Nash equilibrium and reciprocity, and these are relatively narrow forms of rationality. Sharing does not, however, pro-*vide* predictable results for the general case. In his incomparable discussion of sharing among the Inuit, Ingold (1980) points out that the credit for the kill may be assigned in accordance with a number of rules. While there must be a rule, he says, the person who is author-

ized to appear before the band with meat for redistribution may be the person whose arrow most seriously penetrated the animal, the father of this hunter, his hunt leader, the person whose earmarks appear on the arrow, the person who made the arrow, etc. Men who have prestige may prefer to use the arrow of another and avoid having to cut the meat. Furthermore, the distribution can show favoritism to one's mother-in-law, to a chief, to close kin, or to no one in particular. Sharing rules make sense in the context of the specific social structure, but since they are not defined by reference to the private interests of the hunter they are variable across cultures. The Hill and Kaplan argument with Hawkes on the nature and implications of these distributional observations is unnecessary and confusing. Given the social structure that is necessary to the defense of private appropriation when resource holdings are highly asymmetrical, and given that such appropriation is a precondition for trade, we can readily exclude the likelihood of trade as the primary allocation mechanism in societies of hunter-gatherers.

PUBLIC GOODS

My view of hunter-gatherers is not so different from that of Hawkes, except that we are separated by a plate of glass much like the separation between visitors and prisoners at county jail. She, of course, is the prisoner-locked into the restrictions of methodological individualism. In her fable of the hunter, meat is bestowed upon a *public*—a set of atomized others—in the interest of prestige. Were this to occur once and only once, there would be no problem, but when it becomes a common occurrence the privilege of receiving must become a right of person. A person cannot habitually allow others the privilege of using a personal resource without ceding in common law his private rights to the common. And so it is with the hunter. The existence of this right of person creates of necessity a tie of obligation of a person to a set of others, converting the public into a *group relative to that resource*. This group cannot then be de-composed into the set of individuals who belong to it. Indeed, those who belong to it will include the unborn, who, in anticipation of their birth, can be assured of their rightful share.

Hawkes provides us with a contradictory presumption: that hunters have rights to their meat even though there is no social support for this right. This means that this right has been conferred by her (or by Western ideology) in spite of its rejection by the group. The logic, shall we say, of this position is that private appropriation is the primal state of original man and that it is this man whose intimidation by the mob is critical in the evolution of sharing. This view is hardly deserving of further comment.

Hawkes's use of the public-goods concept is troubling. We know that a *pure* public good is one that is not subject to incremental exhaustion—that is, additional users do not affect the consumption of current users. The conventional example is, as Hawkes remarks, the circus.

Unlike meat, which is exhaustible, the circus can be watched with undiminished enjoyment by at least one more person. Hence, in general here is less reason to exclude someone from access to a pure public good, and certainly such exclusion is not worth great effort. Hence, a public good is a form of open-access resource to be used by an uncountable number of (perhaps) atomistic individuals. Since social supports are not needed to defend one's access, there are no use-rights and no corporate group. But for the kind of collective resource of interest in our discussion of hunter-gatherers, the assumptions underlying the public-goods notion do not apply; and one is faced with the need to allocate a scarce resource. In this context, a serious error can arise when one imposes characteristics of private-property regimes upon societies organized around rights of person.

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