1. Introduction

When asked why he contributed to a beggar, and was this not due to Christ’s commandment, Thomas Hobbes responded that he did so “with the sole intent of relieving his own misery at the sight of the beggar” (Losco, 1986: 323). This statement captures a belief held for centuries by many social philosophers and social scientists, by the public-at-large, and championed by the neoclassical school of thought: that human behavior can be explained by self-interest. Altruistic acts, to the extent that they are recognized at all, are depicted merely as another means of pursuing one’s own interest.

Socio-economists strive to correct this way of thinking with a deontological ethic based on a force beyond self-interest—that of moral and social causes. This ethic presents arguments and evidence that people are not driven solely by self-interest but are also significantly directed by their moral considerations. These moral factors represent a source of action and valuation distinctly different from, and often conflicting with, self-interest. Acknowledging this distinction, this chapter shall endeavor to show, allows for more productive conceptualization, is more predictive, and is ethically...
sounder than self-interest-only approaches. The first section is based on substantive arguments. The following two sections present evidence of moral behavior in support of these arguments, both in individual and public choices. The final section illustrates the policy implications of including these moral factors in one’s analyses.

2. As Reflected in Utility Theory

The self-interested, “Hobbesian” view is currently represented in the neoclassical school of thought. Neoclassicists hold that individuals seek to “maximize” one utility: their self-interest, also defined as pleasure, happiness, and consumption. This concept of utility, as developed late in the eighteenth century largely by Jeremy Bentham and widely used by neoclassicists, holds that “[all] actions are directed toward the gain of pleasure or the avoidance of pain” (Dyke, 1981: 31). Moreover, many utilitarians grant moral approval to pleasure: pleasure is “good”; pain is “evil.”

An analysis of this school, specifically its theory of economic utility, uncovers sound conceptual reasons for distinguishing moral causes from those of self-interest. Clearly, self-interest, or pleasure, accounts for a good deal of human behavior, and to this extent the concept of utility is logical, proper, and productive. To assume, however, that all (or virtually all) behavior is explainable in the narrow terms of self-interest is too simplistic. Many actions are either pleasurable or moral but often not both. Many times, pursuing one’s pleasure is in conflict with carrying out one’s moral duties (an area to be addressed in more detail later). Furthermore, ascribing a moral goodness to pursuing one’s pleasure represents a gross value judgment which once removed, allows for the recognition of other sources of value.

When one contemplates the substance of the term “moral behavior,” the kinds of acts the term encompasses, one finds that living up to one’s moral obligations, discharging one’s duties, and doing “what’s right” evokes a feeling distinctly different from that of indulging one of the senses, satisfying a personal need, or doing something “fun.” Indeed, many moral acts are explicitly based on the denial of pleasure in the name of the principle evoked. Doing penance, abstention from premarital sex, and Ramadan fasting are not what most people consider sources of pleasure. True, acting in line with one’s moral precepts produces a kind of satisfaction, a sense of moral worth, but it is more the kind one gets when a hard day’s work is done than the pleasure of getting off work early with full pay.