Helical Biography and the Historical Craft: The Case of Altruism and George Price

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Abstract. The life of George Price (1922–1975), the eccentric polymath genius and father of the Price equation, is used as a prism and counterpoint through which to consider an age-old evolutionary conundrum: the origins of altruism. This biographical project, and biography and history more generally, are considered in terms of the possibility of using form to convey content in particular ways. Closer to an art form than a science, this approach to scholarship presents both a unique challenge and promise.

Keywords: George Price, altruism, the Price (covariance) equation, art, helical biography

Bedtime Reading

It’s been like this ever since I can remember: when I go to a concert, I imagine the composer. Whether it’s Mendelssohn or Prokoffief, Mozart or Cage, my mind immediately pictures the composer at work. Others may be thinking about counterpoint and harmony, or about their own day, or perhaps about eighteenth century Salzburg or nineteenth century Leipzig, or the Russian Revolution or post-war American avant-garde. But I begin with the composer, at his desk, with a pencil or a quill, looking up from the note-page, pausing, smiling in a moment of insight, perhaps grimacing in agony or frustration. Then, amidst the music, I imagine the sound of the scratches filling out a note at the end of a slanted or maybe a straight line. Always, this is my starting point.
What is true of the composer is true for the politician, the scientist, the soldier, the Everyman. Why the person is always my starting point, I am not sure. There is scenery, and politics, society, and culture. There are institutions, and webs of actors, communities and themes. There is the word, and there is logic, and memory, and criticism. There is the disembodied idea. There is self-reflection. All will come to mind, and all will come into play. But first there is the person. I sometimes wonder whether this has to do with the particular books my mother and father read to me before bedtime when I was a boy. But mostly I give up trying.

Ideas came after mortals; they were a second, more mature infatuation. But just as in love, original instincts are never fully conquered, no matter how cerebral or sophisticated one becomes (not to mention the number of lovers). And so, when I became an historian, I found myself attracted to a past that began with men and women, even as it sought to connect to ideas and the outside world. However elaborate the patterns of smoke became, there was always an original match. Ever since, the ways in which the actions and feelings and notions of single actors reflect and refract and construct their environment – the meeting place of history and biography – has become an infatuation.

The challenges of the genre are substantial: How to use a life to tell a wider historical tale? Reflection daring instinct, one begins to wonder: Why, in any case, to use a life at all? The answer is far from always obvious and, working on my last project, was very much on my mind. It was the twentieth century tale of the genius American chemist-turned-IBMer-turned-mathematical-biologist-turned-Evangelical-Christian-turned-homeless-squatter, George Price. Here was the wider issue: Biological altruism is defined by result. If an action of an organism exacts a cost on itself while conferring a benefit on others, the organism is ‘altruistic’. Since it turns out that natural altruism abounds, a paradox immediately arises: How could a trait that reduces fitness survive the ruthless cull of natural selection “daily and hourly scrutinizing,” as Darwin wrote, the minutest variations in the battle for survival? (Darwin, 1996, p. 70). Ever since The Origin, great minds had tackled the conundrum. It was an odyssey where the frailties and peculiarities of men are juxtaposed with the transcending laws of nature. Price, I soon discovered, had played an unknown but crucial role. Like a master composer, he had written down notes in utter solitude. Somehow – whether due to the bias of my parents’ bedtime readings or otherwise – it was intuitively clear to me that his music would make